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THE **AWARDS** ISSUE

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Issue 378
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GEAR OF THE YEAR 2021

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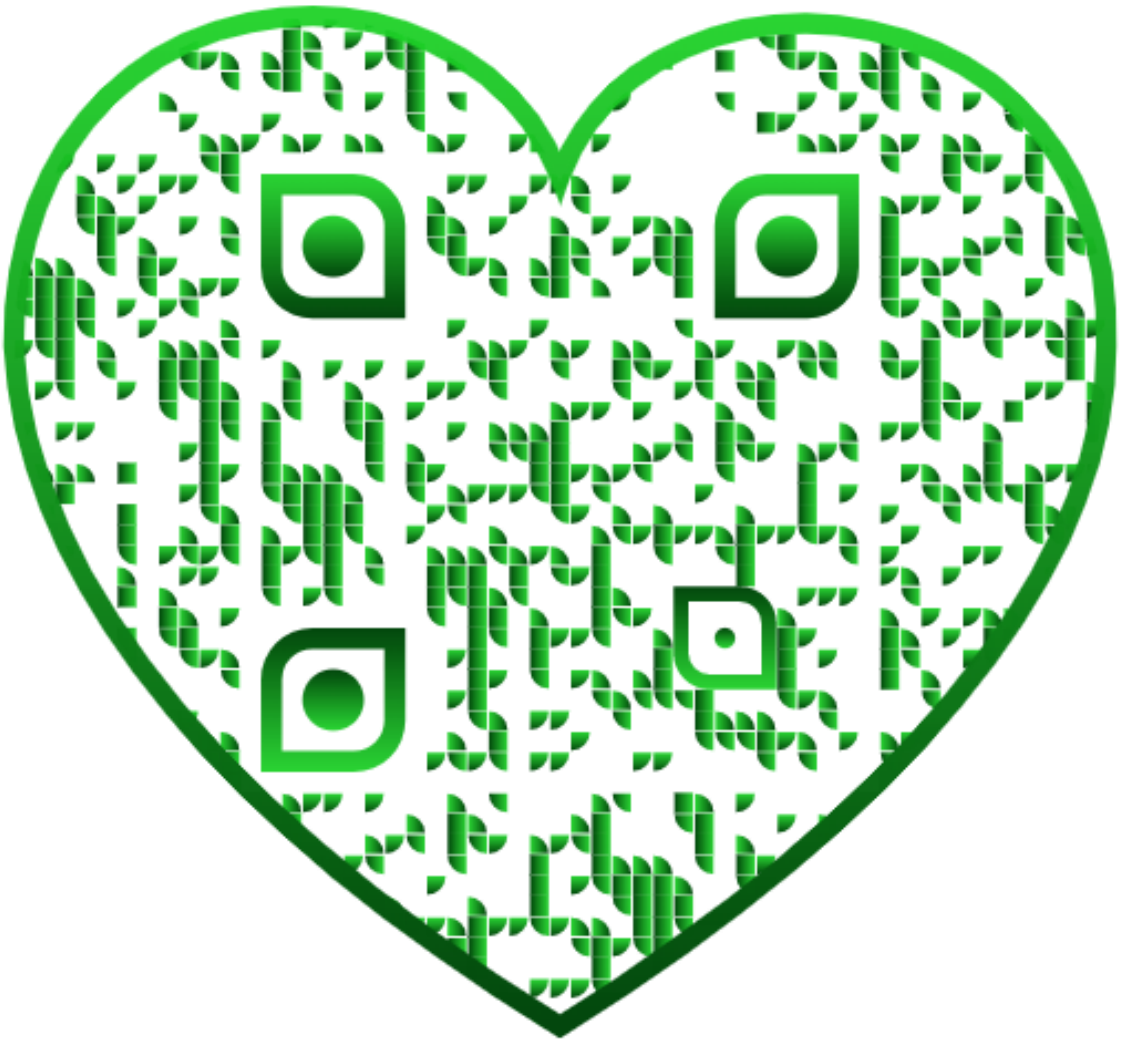

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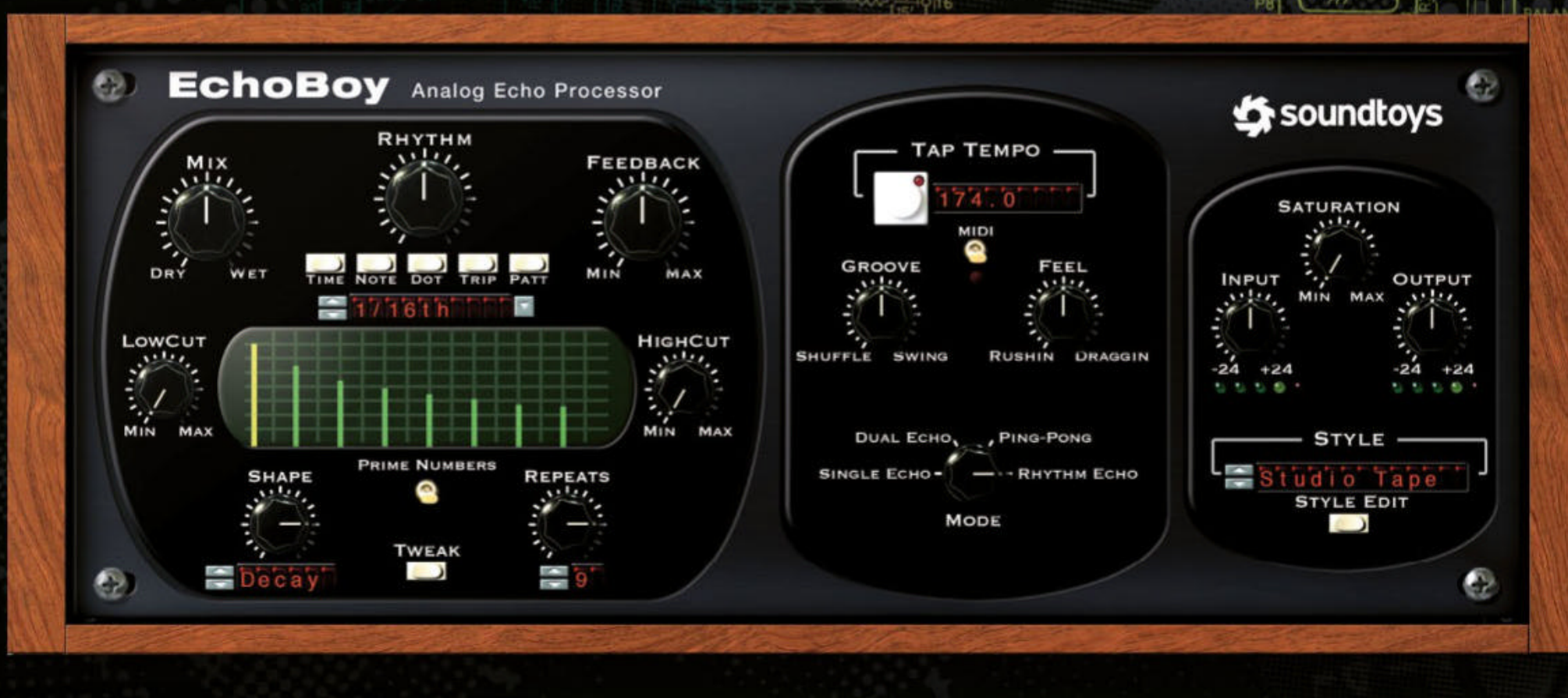

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Goodbye 2021

2021 has been a slightly less strange year than the one that preceded it, despite still being far from normal. The few semblances of normality have been thoroughly welcome though. We've been able to get back out and experience music in the real world, at club nights, gigs and festivals. We've been back in artists' studios in-person too (see our latest session with ambient techno master Richard Fearless on p50). We even managed to make it to a real-world synth trade show in the form of Berlin's Superbooth.

Of course, we've also had plenty of great music-making gear to keep us occupied, which is what we're celebrating this issue with our annual Gear Of The Year rundown. Join us on p26 to learn everything you need to know about 2021's essential synths, plugins, studio gear and more.

We hope you enjoy this issue of FM.

Si Truss, Editor-In-Chief
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FM | ON FILESILO

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Richard Fearless

INCLUDES VIDEO

Take a trip to the Death In Vegas producer's riverside lair – and a step into his *Future Rave Memory*

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- '90s Ambient (562 samples)
- Ambient Dawn (490 samples)

AMBIENT SOUNDS PT.2
- Majestic Bells & Mallets (444 samples)
- Spring Reverb & Tape Delay (533 samples)

ATMOSPHERES & BACKGROUNDS
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- Noise, Crackle & Hiss (512 samples)
- Sounds of the City (371 samples)

CLASSIC SYNTHS PT.1
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- SH Collection (500 samples)

CLASSIC SYNTHS PT.2
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- Hardware Arps (511 samples)

CREATIVE DRUMS
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ESSENTIAL DRUMS
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We open the envelope and reveal our picks for 2021's best and brightest music tech releases

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02 **Organic Loops** Indian Percussion Engima
03 **Element One** Modern Jungle
04 **Get Down Samples** Inner City House Grooves Volume 1
05 **Renegade Audio** Retrofunk
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Creativity First

Moog's much loved Animoog app returns for Mac and iOS

Animoog Z reimagines Moog's virtual synth for 2021

Back in 2011, Moog's Animoog app was one of the most advanced, exciting music-making tools for iOS. Described at the time as "the world's first professional polyphonic synth designed for Apple's iPad", the original Animoog was a wavetable instrument that drew on sounds sampled from the company's illustrious back catalogue of hardware. Ten years on, Moog have now relaunched the app in the form of Animoog Z, billed as a "complete transformation" of the original.

At its heart, this new Animoog shares the same basic principles as its forebear, once again employing Moog's Anisotropic Synth Engine (ASE) technology. Animoog Z is more than just an update to the original though. Moog have redesigned the instrument from the ground up and added a lot of extra functionality.

The core sound engine itself is 16-voice polyphonic and is based around a mixture of wavetable and vector synthesis. Essentially, this assigns wavetable sounds across the synth's X, Y and Z axis and modulates between sound layers using what Moog calls the 'orbit system'.

New for this latest Animoog is the Timbre Editor, which gives users access to fully edit the sounds assigned across this 3D space. The app also adds a recorder, allowing users to capture or import their own source audio for use in Animoog's sound engine.

Animoog Z also adds MPE compatibility, along with a polyphonic modulation system and pitchshifting. There's also a neatly designed effects page offering a variety of tools including an arpeggiator, filter module, unison, delay and looper – each of which is equipped with its own oscilloscope-like view.

Of particular note though, is the fact that Animoog Z can be used across iOS and macOS devices, as an AUv3 plugin.

Animoog Z is free to download, and includes a healthy stock of well-crafted presets. The full version, which allows user access to the sound engine and Timbre Editor, can be purchased in-app, priced at £8.99. Users can also unlock some individual elements of the sound engine, such as the oscillators or a 'fundamental elements' pack, priced at £4.49 per element. FM

FabFilter launch the redesigned Volcano 3

Having updated their Timeless delay plugin to version 3 this year, FabFilter have now returned to another old favourite. Volcano 3 is – as its name so succinctly suggests – the third version of Volcano, the company's rather excellent filter plugin.

Users of Volcano 2 (and, indeed, Volcano 1) will immediately notice the redesigned interface, which promises to improve the visualisation of your audio and modulation signals. There are new filters, too: in addition to the High-, Low-, and Band-Pass types, you now get vintage-style Bell, High/Low Shelf, Notch, and All-Pass modes as well.

Each filter (you can use up to four at once) also gets a variable saturation circuit, plus a 6dB/octave slope option, and independent volume/pan controls.

There are plenty of other tweaks, and iOS users will appreciate the AUv3 plugin version that's available on the App Store.

The desktop version runs on PC/Mac in VST/AU formats and is available now (with a 30-day demo). It costs £94 – with upgrade discount offers. FM

Classic '80s AMS delay/ pitchshifter and Manley tube preamp plugins come to UAD

Universal Audio's UAD Software v9.15 update may not be as big as previous ones, but if you're a fan of the AMS DMX 15-80 S delay/ pitchshifter or Manley Tube Preamp, your powered plugin ship just came in.

Launched in 1978, the AMS DMX 15-80 S was a digital device used on albums by Joy Division, Nirvana, Brian Eno and Prince, and provides that distinctive '80s space and depth.

As well as recreating all of the hardware's features, the UAD version adds Tempo Sync, Dual VCO mode, Dry/Wet Mix, and more. It costs $299.

The Manley Tube Preamp ($149), meanwhile, adds "smooth clarity and front-end tube detail," with Unison technology letting you recreate the impedance characteristics and gainstaging sweet spots of the original's Class-A circuit. These promise additional punch and tone while tracking, and you can also apply the sound of the preamp across multiple channels. FM

Cherry Audio release ARP Quadra virtual synth plugin

Cherry Audio are continuing their emulative tour through synth history with Quadra, a "super-accurate and immensely improved" plugin reboot of the ARP synth of the same name. Released in 1978, the Quadra is definitely a rarity, and we haven't seen it much in software, either. In fact, Cherry Audio say that this is the first time it's been emulated as a virtual instrument.

The Quadra offered four synth sections – Bass, Poly, Lead and Strings – all of which are recreated here. Each one is assignable to any region of the keyboard, giving you total splitting and layering flexibility, and patch browsing is said to be much easier than on the original. You can also expect a richer, fatter tone, and the onboard phaser now has a stereo chorus/flanger, a syncable echo and a reverb for company, too. All of these effects are individually routable.

In terms of sounds, the bass section is monophonic, with the Strings Bass option promising to add orchestral richness. The String section emulates the string ensemble instruments from the '70s and includes a two-band EQ, while the Poly section builds on the original Quadra's by including saw, variable pulse, spike and hollow waveforms, expanded range, and a drift button that effectively recreates the idiosyncrasies of analogue equipment.

Finally, the dual-oscillator Lead section delivers a dual-oscillator synth that includes ramp, pulse, sine, triangle, and noise waves, LFO- or envelope-controlled pulse-width modulation, a two-voice split mode, independent oscillator portamento controls and more.

Quadra is available now in VST/AU/AAX formats for $59. FM

Could IK Multimedia's Syntronik 2 be the only vintage synth plugin you need?

The already huge compendium has added new titles

IK Multimedia are taking you further down the vintage synth rabbit hole with Syntronik 2, a new version of the classic keyboard compendium that brings the total number of synths emulated by them to 33.

There are 11 new instruments to play with – all emulated using a combination of sampling and modelling – and while many of these don't have the high profiles of the 22 big hitters that made it into the first version of Syntronik, there are still some eye-catching additions. These include Korg DW-8000, Waldorf Microwave, Oberheim Matrix-12 and OB-1, Sequential Circuits Prophet VS and Moog Source.

And, of course, all of the emulations from Syntronik 1 have been carried over, with all of their original presets intact, and plenty of new ones besides. In fact, the number of presets runs to a whopping 3,300, and there's a new browser that makes it easier to navigate them.

You can map and play up to four different synth parts simultaneously, or create splits for performance. What's more, each of the four parts has its own note and chord arpeggiator. When used in conjunction with the new step sequencer, these enable you to create musical parts within Syntronik itself.

Among the other new features in Syntronik 2 (some of which are said to be user-requested) are per-oscillator Drift controls that emulate the behaviour of analogue circuitry, extended envelopes and LFOs (plus a programmable mod matrix) and a Wave Set Browser that enables you to choose the sound for each of up to four oscillators and two sub-oscillators per preset, taking the sound design possibilities to a new level.

71 effects are included, too – pulled from IK's T-RackS, MixBox and AmpliTube 5 – and you can insert up to five simultaneously via a lunchbox-style interface. 33 of the effects are new.

There are three paid-for versions of Syntronik 2: SE (11 synths), standard (22 synths) and Max (33 synths). These are available from $100/€100.

Owners of qualifying IK products can get upgrade/crossgrade pricing (check your account to see) and, anyone who purchases the Total Studio 3.5 Max or Total VI Max bundle will get it for free.

There's also a free version, Syntronik 2 CS, which is fully-functional and comes with 100 presets and 2.4GB of sound content. FM

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TALKING SHOP

Paleman

Back in the early '10s, the dark, cerebral sound of early dubstep compelled a generation of forward-thinking producers to reconstruct club music in innovative forms.

Calum Lee was at the heart of this scene, producing warped, bass-heavy rollers that thrived in the murky no-man's-land between house, dubstep and techno. After launching his own label, PLMN, in 2016, Lee's output shifted further towards the experimental, and he began working on a series of self-titled EPs that have culminated in the hallucinatory sonics of this year's *PLMN005*, and two EPs under a new alias, Fresnel Lens.

Lee was kind enough to invite us into his attic studio, revealing how he's transitioned to an almost fully modular workflow and dropping some production power tips for good measure.

When did you start making music?

"I started learning jazz drums when I was 11 and used to record drum solos and guitar stuff into GarageBand.

"Around 15 I got a copy of Reason 3. I think this was around 2006-7, I was obsessed with Burial and the emerging dubstep sound. I was making dubstep all day every day on Reason, inspired by DMZ and Burial. It was a magic time."

> "A lot of small changes and tweaks can add up to the biggest change"

Tell us about your studio setup

"Right now I work at home in my attic in south Manchester. It's a decent sized space that I've done a small bit of acoustic treatment on. I've been here about a year since leaving London during the pandemic.

"I made a switch to using all hardware in around 2016, after spending a lot of time working with analogue methods with Boddika. The sounds I make and use are probably 95% modular these days, and I record through a range of analogue hardware and outboard effects.

"I still use EQ and dynamics plugins and a few UAD preamps, but I've become completely obsessed with the sound of hardware and really feel that I've found a workflow and sonic palette that I'd been looking for a while. I like how quick it feels, and I enjoy the unpredictability of patching and experimenting with your hands and the machines.

"Troubleshooting can be a problem sometimes with an analogue studio – stuff like dead cables or various other physical problems like repairing gear can sometimes slow things down, but it's worth it."

What DAW do you use, and why?

"I currently use Logic X and a UAD console to record and mix. I switched from Reason 4 in around 2013-14 after becoming increasingly aware of its restrictions (at that time) and wanting to record and use plugins."

What one piece of gear in your studio could you not do without, and why?

"I guess a soundcard and monitors would be the two pieces of gear I literally couldn't work without. But in a more creative sense, I'd struggle without the modular system now, I've become so used to the workflow and enjoy it so much – it would be a big adjustment if I couldn't use it!"

What's been your latest purchase?

"I bought an SSL Fusion recently to process my master bus, and some new monitors, Neumann KH310s. The SSL Fusion is a wonderful piece of kit, everything I've done in 2021 has been through it and I feel it's elevated and glued my tone 5% more.

"New monitors were a struggle for a few months but I'm really settling into them now. They were a big upgrade from my previous KRK monitors; the learning curve was a little steep, but the benefits are huge.

"As far as modular goes, I built an exclusively Make Noise system for my experimental and compositional work under the alias Fresnel Lens – restricting myself to one system for the project has been immensely satisfying and interesting."

What gear do you dream of having?

"I'd love a Buchla or Serge modular system one day, and a high-end mixing console. The world of analogue processing and outboard effects is a big obsession for me, I'd love more Thermionic Culture gear… the list is endless."

How do you approach a new track?

"I usually start with a patch idea on the modular system, then work around that. It could be a drum pattern or a drone or anything really. I tend to do a multitrack recording of around 3-4 tracks on the modular for an initial idea, and then go back in with a new patch over the top."

What are you currently working on?

"I've just released PLMN005, so work on PLMN006 will begin shortly. I have a couple more Paleman EPs scheduled for next year on other labels away from my imprint (PLMN) which I'm excited about.

"Right now I'm working on new Fresnel Lens material. Fresnel Lens is a new alias I launched earlier this year as an output for more experimental work, and also for my work in film scoring and bespoke compositional projects. I released two EPs this year as Fresnel Lens on Bandcamp; the response was amazing.

"For it to be received enthusiastically by people feels hugely encouraging. I've always composed music away from the clubs too, so to show that side of my work has been great. More Fresnel Lens and Paleman material on the way…" FM

PALEMAN'S TOP TIPS

Restrict yourself

1 **"I don't view this as a moral thing (ie restriction is morally better than indulgence). However, I've noticed over the years that a lot of works that are sonically clear, or unique, have come from an artist choosing to work with a limited set of materials or sounds, or whatever."**

Spread it out

2 **"Over time I've noticed that the sum of a lot of small changes and tweaks can add up to the biggest change. For example, I record a kick drum with a bit of analogue EQ and compression, but only a tiny bit. Then once it's recorded, I'd compress and EQ again, and then it would get compressed *again* during mastering. The compression is never too heavy-handed, but the overall effect of this accumulated dynamic and frequency control ends up very satisfying."**

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Claude VonStroke **Beware of the Bird**

Dirtybird, 2006

Initial reactions to Claude VonStroke and friends' first parties and music releases on his own Dirtybird label were not, it's fair to say, great. Their signature sound of bleeps, bloops, and bonkers bass failed to capture the imaginations of the local San Francisco dance music scene.

"We got zero respect," says VonStroke. "Everyone is like, 'What the fuck? This isn't cool'. We got 10 people to our parties. But, we didn't give up on this dream."

While all the happening clubs on the West Coast were bumping the smooth sounds of labels like Naked Music Recordings, that lot were obsessed with Playhouse, Klang, and the bumpier, dirtier sounds of forward-thinkers like David Duriez and Derrick Carter.

"Also, I was from Detroit, so I had that side to me," says VonStroke. "And the label was in San Francisco, and we were all jungle-heads, and had seen how that scene ended up going down to that extremely dark, tech-step thing, with rooms just full of dudes. We wanted to get the party going again.

"So, we said, 'Let's get jungle, Detroit, Derrick Carter, and Green Velvet all into a house label, while still sounding like friendly West Coast music, with a touch of hyphy', which was also massive.

"That's where my head was at as Dirtybird started. In our little collective, everyone agreed that what was out right then sucked."

Thankfully, sticking to their guns paid off. Tastemakers like Richie Hawtin began caning VonStroke's B-side, *Who's Afraid Of Detroit?* And eyes were turning to the plucky little label.

"Then it was a case of compiling all the tracks I had that worked in clubs," says VonStroke. "They all ended up going on my debut. That's why the album went on to be so successful – I got to test everything out there, live, and tweak it so everything worked. It was just a super happy time, but it took time. And I was just kind of breaking out, with something completely different and new."

Words by Roy Spencer

Track by track with **Claude VonStroke**

Claude and crew's latest Dirtybird White Label Series, which operates at the more experimental edge of electronic music, has recently provided bangers from Nikki Nair, Danny Goliger, and Justin Jay, complete with original hand-drawn bird logo on 12" labels.

Elsewhere, the main label celebrated their seventh annual Dirtybird Campout festival in Modesto Reservoir Regional Park, California. And news just in that VonStroke and Green Velvet will be performing again as the Get Real duo in the coming months, (supported by themselves, in various alter-egos).

"I would like to say one thing about this album that I think really mattered a lot, which was just that our whole vibe was so funny. Like, the cover, which is shot by Shauna Regan – I think that actually really had helped the album go a long way. I bought a bird costume for $800 and my wife almost killed me. It's still by far my best album cover."

Warming Up The Bass Machines

"I had a Sherman Filterbank for like, three days. And I just ran bass sounds through it for this track *[laughs]*. And I think Marc Houle stopped by my studio, as well, when I was doing this, and turned some of the knobs.

"I actually think I made the core of that track when I was still living in Detroit, and I just kept it on my hard drive. I thought it was so weird, so wanted to use it.

"And then I put in the voice, almost like, 'Hello, are we starting up the equipment now?' I was trying to make this thing like we're starting up the equipment, but the equipment is all bass *[laughs]*. That was the point of that track, at least."

Deep Throat

"And then *Deep Throat* comes out. And, honestly, nothing changed. We just thought it was cool. That's the first track of mine that I released on Dirtybird. It's like Dirtybird db003. And that took a long time to circulate.

"It went through Neuton, which is a defunct German distributor. They were the only distributor that would take Dirtybird having heard the demos. Everyone else was like, 'No way'. The US ones turned me down.

"Neuton thought we were weird and funny. So, our vinyl distribution went through Germany. Which ended up being a really cool thing for us. Because, in San Francisco, if your music came back from a weird German distributor, it was automatically cooler."

Chimps

"This was definitely, like, this idea that we were going to be different, and have this whole other sound – that caveman sound.

"I actually had signed this track to Get Physical Music, and I was so excited. And then it was on their compilation *[Full Body Workout Vol. 02]*, and it was like, buried, but it was killing it in San Francisco. So, I just asked them, 'Hey, can I put this on my album? And then can I have it back?' Cuz then I sold like, 4,000 vinyls of it as well. So, they kind of just said, 'Fine. We don't care. It's just a compilation track'. But, for me, it was a big track, especially on the West Coast.

"It's not the kind of track that would get played in Europe, but it was definitely a big track in California. It's just a silly, big, bass-y thing. And there's a limit to what Europe can handle on the silly chart *[laughs]*. I think this crossed over the line."

Beware Of The Bird

"This was very much influenced by what was happening at that time, which was like DJ T and M.A.N.D.Y. That sound. Electro/house. And remember 20:20 Vision? Ralph Lawson's label – that. I was just trying to make something in that genre.

"I didn't use a lot of soft synths. I liked to sample synths. I used tons of stock sounds out of Reason. It didn't matter. Which is crazy because now I have all the equipment in the world.

"This is kind of a secret, hidden track. I rarely play it, but it's cool. As opposed to other tracks I think back to and go, 'meeeh?' But that's not one of them."

The Whistler

"This one is another case where I had this single that started doing amazing things. And I just kind of lumped it into the album.

"But, you have to remember that *The Whistler* and *Who's Afraid of Detroit?* were on the one record. I knew *Who's Afraid of Detroit?* was good. But, what happened with that record was very telling of what happened with a lot of my records, going forward.

"Which is, that quite often, I come out with, like, a smoking A-side that makes everyone happy. And then the B-side is this really sneaky, deep cut, that is the one everyone ends up liking better.

"So, *The Whistler* went onto BBC Radio 1. And it was getting spins on the UK airwaves, and it was on, like, a UK T-Mobile commercial, too! So it was this big track."

Who's Afraid of Detroit?

"...And then *Who's Afraid of Detroit?*" took a full year for people to even realise that it's on the backside of that record! But, it ends up being 10 times bigger than *The Whistler*.

"Back then, records could percolate for a year to get known. But, this one did get there.

"After that Damian Lazarus booked me for Get Lost, which was in this dirty ass room in Shoreditch, before Shoreditch was nice at all. And I ended up going over there and then played in like, weird spots. And I was just like, I'll play to anyone who listened to me at that point. I was like, really, really green. But, I was getting known."

Eastern Market

"I still really like this track. I was still working at a post production house and I made this for a thing called Rez Fest, which was a digital filmmaking festival. I became their sound designer for all their interstitials and bumpers and opening things, because

they would come into the post production house where I worked to try and get a deal on everything, because they had no money. They had this company out of Kansas City that made this animation for the opening of Rez Fest, and I made this song to sync with that animation. So, if you go back and look at Rez Fest 2005, or something, this is the song. But, it sounds so cool anyway, that I just put it on the album."

Cicada (Claude VonStroke 17 Year Mix)

"This is a remix of Justin Martin's track. I just thought that it was doing something that nobody else was doing. And it took a few chances.

"It was kind of like this Nirvana-type idea where I'm gonna go hard and then soft, and hard and soft. Nobody was really doing that – and I don't actually know if it works *[laughs]*. But, it did at that point.

"It was made back when I was doing remixes; and it would end up so far away from their original. I would put in the same amount of effort as any of my original tracks, so I put it on the album."

Seven Deadly Strokes

"This is one of those ones that I'm like, 'meeeh?' *[laughs]*. I liked the idea of it. But, the sound, the sound selection, I maybe would change, if I was gonna go back to this one.

"This one I actually signed to the German distributor, Neuton, who actually had a label [Neutonmusic]. And there was another case where I was like, 'Guys, can I just put this on the album?' And they're like, 'Sure'.

"They released this on its own as a vinyl. And if someone out there wants to really go dig, that wouldn't be too hard to find."

> "I DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING. WHICH WAS AWESOME"

Bullshit (VonStroke Birdshit Remix)

"This is another of the remixes on the album. This was a track by French DJ and producer, Frankie, and another case of where I really went in and redid a track.

"I was obsessed with Frankie, who's from Paris. I'm still obsessed with him, to the point where on my last album, I had a track dedicated to him ['*Frankie Goes to Bollywood*'].

"He is probably the best producer that not many people have heard of, in my opinion. He's got a very unique style of highly swung beats with like blips, and it's just fascinating. So, that was why that's on there."

The Southern Draw (Southern Fried Mix)

"And this is the last of the remixes I put on the album. This one is Justin Martin and Sammy.

"I mean, if I had to go back, I would have obviously not put this many remixes on here. It's so weird that there are so many remixes. But, uh, yeah, this is another case where the remix is like, pretty far away from the original, so it felt like it would make sense as a track on my album.

"The original was actually the first release on Dirtybird. It's db001. And I love the original – it's so odd. It's one of the oddest tracks, even still today, if you let go and listen to it.

"It's the whole reason why people make jokes about Dirtybird being just a bunch of fart noises, because there actually are fart noises in there!"

Lullaby (Live)

"This is a live track from 1999. I had friends in Detroit who did these raves called Poorboy, and I played there.

"I was really struggling and trying to do a live drum & bass show in Detroit raves, when no one cared about jungle in Detroit, at all. I was in this side, side, side, side room, setting up for three hours to tearing down for three hours. No one cared. That was from that era.

"And it's just kind of a homage to me struggling, and trying to break through. So, the recording is quite old. But, then I had Qzen talk over the top in French *[laughs]*. And I just wanted something on there to remind me about the struggle." FM

In the studio with Claude VonStroke

"You'll laugh because the studio was basically a bedroom that became a baby bedroom, seven months later. It was in a very small flat on Haight Street in San Francisco.

"All I had was a Novation controller called an X-Station, with a soundcard. And Reason 3. Nothing else. I made the entire album off that.

"I didn't know anything. Which was awesome. I just would make it sound as good as I could make it sound. But, I didn't even know how to sidechain, or anything about modern production techniques. I would just get it to sound good in that room.

"I used to run things into Reason really hard, and that worked for me. It was like a brickwall limiter without me even knowing that that was what it was, because I think they had coded it in to not go over zero. I was really just a bedroom producer."

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For all the latest squawkings from the Dirtybird web-nest, flutter on down to: **dirtybirdrecords.com**

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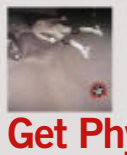

Get Physical
Full Body Workout Vol. 02

Compilation on the Claude-approved label, featuring *Chimps*, which he would license back for his debut album, that year.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Big One', 'Discoheadz (Rough Demo Cut)', 'Chimps'

Various
Dirtybird Campout Compilation

The label's much-loved festival tent-a-thon rounds up the perfect soundtrack to a night under the stars.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Function', 'Fixation', 'Can You Funk'

Get Real
Mind Yo Bizness/ Snuffaluffagus

Claude and Green Velvet team up as Get Real to deliver tech house magic on this 2016 EP. And, rejoice, as more action from the duo is planned this year.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Mind Yo Bizness', 'Snuffaluffagus'

Fred Everything
Light Of Day

Just one of the deep house nuggets found on Ralph Lawson's Leeds-based label that the Dirtybird crew looked to for inspiration.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Light Of Day', 'Close To You', 'Elevate'

Claude VonStroke
Freaks and Beaks

VonStroke's 2020 artist album. Fun, freaky funk and a fitting tribute to his fave producer, Frankie.

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:
'Warming Up The Bass Machines', 'Freaks Don't Fail Me Now', 'Frankie Goes to Bollywood'

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Jim Wallis and Nick Goss
Pool

Tip Top Recordings

The beautiful, highly atmospheric and ethereal collaborative album from multi-instrumentalist Jim Wallis and painter/guitarist, Nick Goss. In early 2020, Goss spent several weeks as part of an artist residency onboard the 183-meter tanker, the Cielo Di Gaeta, on the Adriatic sea.

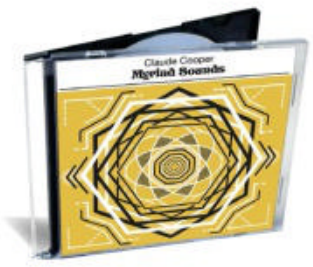
Back in London, Goss then took the field recordings he made of life onboard and together with his ex-bandmate Wallis, began to create these wonderful, textured soundscapes in an attempt to capture and document the journey. Combining ambient, classical and experimental industrial music alongside the natural recordings, the album is a beautifully paced, measured piece. Goss' melancholic and stretched out guitar loops are accompanied by Wallis' subtle yet haunting strings and wistful piano keys as the field recordings of everyday life on the boat remain ever-present. From the comforting sounds of the waves, to the voices of crew members and the whirring of machines and equipment, the tapestry of natural sounds transports us on-deck in an instant. The swooping, undulating sounds that sweep through the album's amorphous structure conjures up images of the blurring of sea, sky, fog and boats into one all-encompassing atmosphere. Wallis and Goss lure subtle flashes of warmth, light, melody and clarity through the walls of fog to bring beauty, humanity and emotion to the natural landscape. Reflective, melancholic, insular and yet at peace with the world, *Pool* feels like a very personal time, caught still in space. A mesmerising, dream-like album, *Pool* will take you on your own personal journey out to sea. ***Tom Jones***

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Seventh Man, Baker's Dolphin, Coral

10/10

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Claude Cooper
Myriad Sounds
Friendly Recordings

Having first emerged in a shroud of mystery, bang in the middle of that first brutal lockdown, Bristol's elusive Claude Cooper returns with his magnificently bustling debut album of motley sounds. Aptly named *Myriad Sounds*, the record is an unrestrained, bristling hive of creativity with various styles, genres and tempos spilling from every direction. A heady concoction of jazz, psychedelic-funk, breaks, trip-hop and post-punk, the record feels intuitive as Cooper explores his urges with total freedom. There is an improvisational spirit, mixed with deft arrangement, especially when it comes to the mesmerising jazz-breaks-style drums and rumbling basslines that pump the momentum throughout. Expressive saxophone and horns bring the flair as Cooper guides us to the realms of dreamy and hypnotic astral jazz. It's the ever-shifting, relentless, bristling energy that gives the album its wild and direct aesthetic. A brilliant and highly expressive debut, *Myriad Sounds* only deepens the intrigue for Claude Cooper further. Let's hope that he emerges from the shadows again soon.

Tom Jones

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Tangerine Dreams, Bloom
Fields, Stan's Plan

9/10

RECOMMENDED

Majid Soula
Chant Amazigh
Habibi Funk

Habibi Funk continue to shine the light on music from the Arab world, this time bringing focus to the energetic sounds of Algerian artist, Majid Soula. An Amazigh artist, singer, and activist, Soula's music burns brightly with impassioned fervour, spirit and fun. Fusing elements of Arab disco, highlife, funk, rock and synth-pop, Soula ignites a shimmering concoction of sounds into an enthralling, never-resting record. Clean, energetic guitar lines collide with bright synths, bustling drums, addictive basslines, jangling keys and Soula's direct vocals to create an ever-shifting, immersive soundscape. The tracks in this collection were recorded mostly in the '80s and there's a strong, synth-laden patchwork of groovy landscapes that intertwine with traditional instrumentation. Full of energy and positivity, *Chant Amazigh* bursts with pride and love. Majid Soula has tirelessly brought Amazigh issues to the agenda and never before has activism sounded so good. A brilliant snapshot of his unflinching spirit, this is finally getting the recognition his music deserves. ***Tom Jones***

ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

Lgira, Netseweth Sifassan
Nagh, Win Terram

8/10

Alai K
Kila Mara
On the Corner

Kila Mara is the frenetic, intoxicating debut album from Alai K. The Kenya born, Berlin-based percussionist, vocalist, DJ, producer is much loved for his Disco Vumbi series and Nyege Tapes and his debut LP is an explosive and expressive thrill-ride that taps into the ancestral rhythms, customs and the rituals of East Africa as much as it does the underground clubs of Berlin and Detroit. There's the driving undercurrent of energy that propels the record forward, the rapid, polyrhythmic drums, the chopped up vocal chants and the hypnotic, repetitive structures that will be as recognisable to the communities in the Bajuni Islands, Mozambique or Malawi as they are to club-goers in the West. However, it's in stepping out of the confines of traditional club music that Alai K is able to take this record into the next realm. Fierce, unpredictable and wild drums give the album a live and untamed feel. Although there is plenty of spell-inducing, hypnotism going on here, the record is never still or comfortable and instead is always flicking out rouge additions and unnamed sparks of blistering heat and intensity. A brilliantly wild and unflinching debut that takes on an ambitious merging of disparate styles and cultures, *Kila Mara* is yet further evidence of Alai K's astute and global approach to making music. ***Tom Jones***

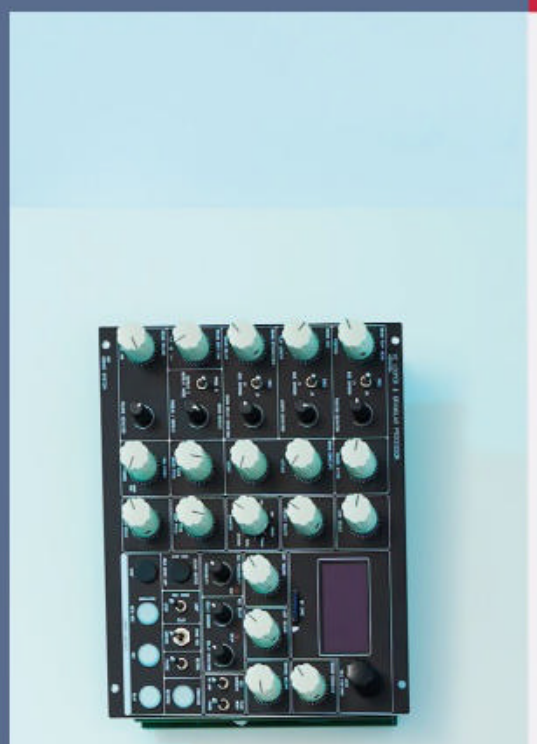
ADD THESE TO YOUR PLAYLIST:

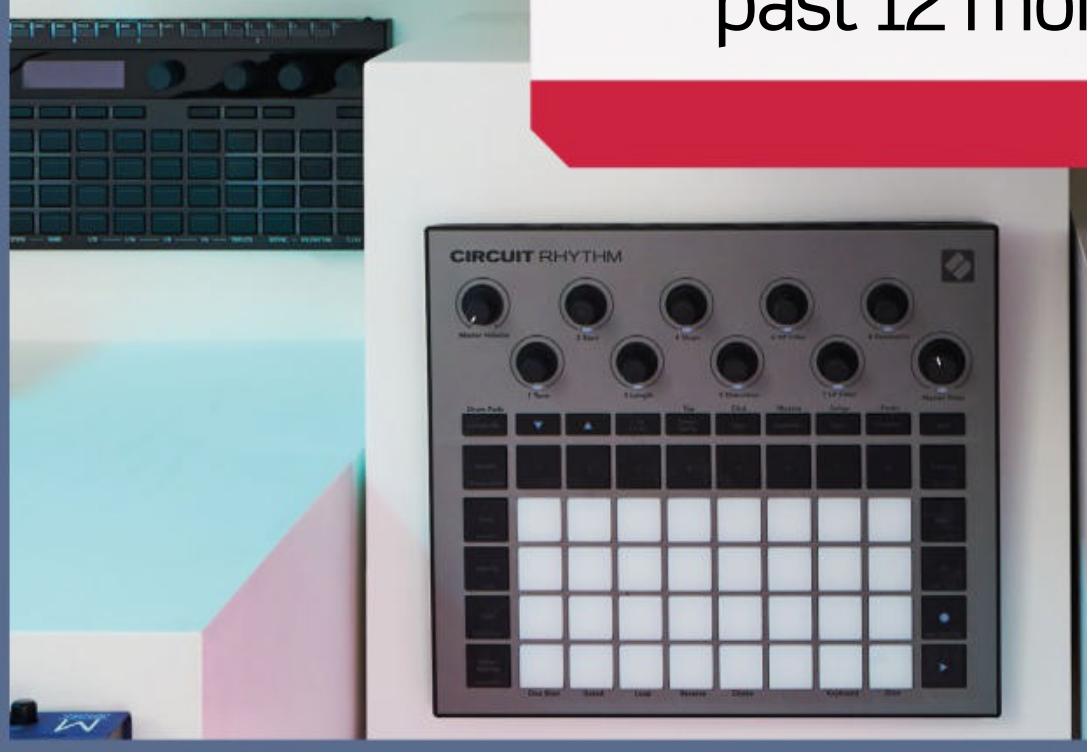
Leo, Ishakua Tabu, Em Mola

9/10

GEAR OF THE YEAR 2021

From cutting-edge plugins to revamped DAWs, vintage synth revivals to future-classic samplers, 2021 has had plenty to offer electronic music makers. Let's crown the gear highlights of the past 12 months





2021: A YEAR IN BEATS

Tracks is our favourite groovebox of 2021, but it's not been the only beatmaking game in town. In fact, it's not even the only Circuit released this year, with the sample-focussed **Circuit Rhythm** following hot on its heels. There's a lot to like about Rhythm – particularly the sharp design and powerful sequencer it shares with its sibling – although for our money it loses a touch of the intuitiveness. The sampling workflow is inherently more complex, and operating without a screen can be fiddly at times.

This is a problem that Roland managed to overcome with their **SP-404 MKII**. The surprise follow-up to a cult hardware classic beloved by LA's beat scene. The 404 MKII crams an impressive amount of sampling (and resampling) power into its compact frame. The addition of an improved screen and revamped sequencing workflow make for a surprisingly intuitive machine though. Expect to see it onstage and in countless YouTube jam videos for years to come.

When it comes to synthesised beats, 2021 belongs to Erica Synths. Working alongside developer Sonic Potions, the Latvian brand launched an update to the latter company's LXR drum machine. The resulting **LXR-02** is a wonderfully punchy and versatile digital percussion synth, brought to life by a deceptively flexible sequencer akin to that found on last year's impressive Bassline DB-01 synth. We're equally excited about things to come from Erica though. The company's forthcoming groovy, esoteric hybrid drum machine **Perkons HD-01** was a clear highlight of Superbooth 2021.

DRUMS & GROOVEBOXES

WINNER

NOVATION CIRCUIT TRACKS

Tracks is the perfect example of how to create a follow-up to a hit product. The second generation Circuit doesn't mess with the winning elements of the original – the powerful digital polysynths, the slick hardware layout, the balance of accessibility vs depth – but doubles down in some important areas. Improvements to the sequencer, MIDI capabilities and I/O mean that this is not only a killer groovebox in its own right, but also a powerful, tactile hub for studio or stage performance.

SYNTH SPINOFFS AND REVIVALS

When it came time to take stock at the end of last year, we were genuinely surprised at how much exciting new gear had made its way out into the world, given the circumstances of a global pandemic and general shutdown of much of society. 2021 has been the opposite, to an extent. Possibly as a delayed result of the pandemic, combined with various geopolitical and supply chain issues, there's been a noticeable slowdown in gear releases – at least when it comes to major hardware synths.

> "A NOTICEABLE SLOWDOWN IN GEAR RELEASES"

For the most part, the significant new instruments of 2021 have all been additions to or adaptations of existing ranges. Aside from Modwave – itself a close sibling of last year's GOTY winners Opsix and Wavestate – we were also impressed this year with IK Multimedia's **UNO Synth Pro**. To be fair, although the two versions of the Pro (keyboard and desktop), are essentially evolutions of IK's cheap-as-chips analogue UNO Synth, both are a significant step up. The addition of dual filters, stereo effects and a vastly more 'pro' build turn both iterations of the UNO Synth Pro into properly substantial, flexible analogue instruments. Here's hoping a polyphonic version is on the horizon.

Elsewhere, two of our favourite synths of recent years spawned new versions. The incredibly powerful **Super 6**, from UK brand UDO, now has a keyboard-less desktop version, giving potential users access to the instrument's binaural hybrid synth engine in a unit with a smaller footprint and slightly lower pricetag. ASM's excellent digital poly Hydrasynth, meanwhile, is now joined by two new variations. The first is a top-end Deluxe version with increased 16 voice polyphony and a 73-note keyboard. More exciting is the affordable **Hydrasynth Explorer**, which packages the original's 8-voice wavetable engine into a compact, battery-powered frame for under £600.

Despite delivering our synth of the year, Korg have been a little slow off the mark delivering instruments teased at January's (virtual) NAMM. At the time of writing, the company's latest remakes – the **MiniKORG 700S** and **ARP 2600M** – are just starting to hit the UK. No word on the DrumLogue.

Two more of 2021's most interesting synths also offered new spins on classic designs. Waldorf's **M** (reviewed on p74) turns the early-wavetable designs of the company's Microwave synths into a modern digital poly. Sequential, meanwhile, surprised us with the **Take 5**, a Prophet-5 derived polysynth that's unusually accessible and affordable for the US brand. It's a winning combination, and hopefully a sign of things to come for the newly Focusrite-owned brand.

SYNTHS

WINNER

KORG MODWAVE

When we reviewed Modwave, we concluded that, despite its versatility, it was a touch less unique than its siblings Opsix and Wavestate. Having spent more time with Modwave, however, we've become even more impressed with how flexible its wavetable engine is. The dual-layered, morphing design and virtual analogue filters do everything from emulating vintage polysynths to creating otherworldly morphing textures. It's not the quickest synth to program, but the price-to-depth ratio is impossible to argue with.

MIDI, CV AND MORE

Looking at the 'controller' market in 2021, the sheer variety of tools available to help you get hands-on with your music making is impressive.

If classic MIDI keyboards are your thing, there is an absolutely huge selection out there vying for your attention. Of recent releases, M-Audio's recently launched **Oxygen Pro** range stand out for their winning combination of deep DAW integration, flexible features and low price.

At the more esoteric end of things, Torso Electronics' **T-1** is a brilliantly left-of-centre MIDI sequencer that can create multiple polyphonic Euclidean cycles. For those looking for inspiration away from traditional step sequencers, it can be a great way to inspire fresh rhythmic ideas.

Having spent much of the past few years focused on standalone production stations, Akai brought its MPC range back into the controller sphere with the revival of its **MPC Studio**. We're big fans of Akai's recent self-contained MPCs, but it's still nice to see an option for fans who might not have the need or budget for the One or Live II. Those recent MPCs have been impressive in the ways they refined and expanded upon the modern MPC workflow. It's nice that Akai have now brought those benefits to a device for dedicated desktop musicians.

Also worthy of note is SSL's impressive – if pricey – mixing controller **UF8**. The price tag of £900 is not for the faint-hearted, but you'll be hard-pressed to find a higher quality replacement for that classic mixing desk workflow.

CONTROLLERS

WINNER

KORG SQ-64

A few years ago, good quality CV sequencers were hard to come by, but in 2021 we're somewhat spoilt for choice. Korg's SQ-64 joins the likes of Arturia's 'Steps and Novation's SL keyboards in updating analogue sequencing (plus MIDI and USB) for the 21st century. The 64 brings something fresh though, in its sleek portability – this is a fully fledged poly sequencer you could happily slip into a laptop bag – and the inclusion of some neat performance tools.

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It took an impressive amount of design to revolutionize bus-powered, studio-grade interfaces. Now we are responding with **Revolution 2x2**: the ultimate in portable recording interfaces. Revolution isn't another run-of-the-mill interface from big brother – it's the interface the world has always asked for.

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Pair the unrivaled digital strength with a hi-end, hi-fi analog path (using the most high-end components by Vishay, Nichicon, and Wima), and fully decoupled balanced I/O, and you're almost there. Revolution also employs "**PG-i**" technology internally, based off of Black Lion Audio's experience in engineering their "best-of-class" power conditioners.

Revolution also includes a robust software suite, starting with **PreSonus Studio One Artist** – the cutting edge DAW for all of your production needs. To round it all out, we've included select plugins from **Izotope**, **BrainWorx**, and **Lindell**.

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A YEAR OF DAW UPDATES

Aside from Live, 2021 was not exactly what you'd call a classic year for DAWs – at least when you compare it to 2020, which saw a whole raft of releases including Cubase 11, Tracktion Pro 11, Universal Audio's debut DAW, Luna, PreSonus Studio One 5, Acoustica Mixcraft 9 Pro Studio and the dramatic Live-like Logic Pro 10.5.

And nor are DAW developers making it easy for us to keep up to speed any more, as they did around version 9, when so many DAWs seemed to adhere to the same version number. **FLStudio** broke ranks and has shot straight to version 20, where it has remained, while other DAWs like **Pro Tools** have now eschewed version numbers altogether, replacing them with years (and constant updates within them) that align with their new subscription models.

> "LOGIC'S DOLBY ATMOS MIXING STEALS THE HEADLINES"

That all being said, there *were* some quite significant DAW updates in 2021. **Reason 12** had a new sampler plus a fantastic update to Combinator, surely one of its greatest assets. "Not essential," we said of the update but, "Reason is looking the best it has in years." Cubase saw its big v11 release come out just as 2020 closed so it doesn't make the cut on a technicality, although version 12 has been promised for 2022 with "new features and significant workflow improvements".

Bitwig Studio reached the significant milestone of version 4, so perhaps it's time to stop thinking of this as the new DAW on the block – indeed if you really want to feel old, we'll just gently mention that Bitwig have been with us for 12 years. They grow up so quick! And perhaps it's also time to think of Studio as one of the big DAW contenders, because version 4 saw some big improvements, with a more inventive way of helping us make music still its main focus. "Bitwig's forte remains its creative features and v4 pushes these into ever more weird and wonderful directions," as our review put it.

Perhaps the one release that threatened Live 11's grip on 2021 in any serious way was another big update as 2021 drew to a close. **Logic 10.7** duly delivers Producer Packs (samples to you and me, and 2,800 of them) from the likes of Mark Ronson and TRAKGIRL plus significant updates to the Step Sequencer (including live recording) and overall refreshes for several plugins.

But the DAW's Dolby Atmos mixing steals the headlines – and it very nearly won our GOTY vote based on that. The only possible fly in the ointment is **Logic 10.7**'s main requirement of macOS Big Sur, which – if you haven't already upgraded to it – has been known to cause issues with some plugins, so bear that in mind.

SOFTWARE & DAWS

WINNER

ABLETON LIVE 11

Ableton Live 11 gets our vote as DAW of the year, but it was a close call between it and the dramatic update to Logic Pro (10.7) at the end of the year. Live 11 wins thanks to its huge list of (arguably) smaller updates, some to level up with competitors – comping and take lanes – and some just wonderful additions, like the PitchLoop89 and Hybrid Reverb effects, MPE support and probability editing. It all makes Live feel slicker, more comprehensive and at something of a peak in its 20th year.

2021'S MUST-HAVE PLUGINS

Synths-wise, highlights of 2021 include **OB-E**, another stunning (albeit so far Mac-only) emulation from GForce, this time based around the Oberheim 8-voice. Not an emulation, and certainly benefitting from doing whatever it wants because of it, is the latest v3 incarnation of **Pigments,** Arturia's first ever non-emulation synth and *whisper* one of their best.

On the subject of instruments, one of the biggest names in software, Spitfire Audio, upped the ante, pumping out more libraries than ever before, the highlights of which were **Hammers**, delivering a bespoke set of percussion tools collated by Saw composer Charlie Clouser, and **Albion Solstice**, covering both orchestral and more extreme instrumentation.

> "2021 COULD BE SEEN AS A YEAR OF NEW RANGES"

Orchestral Tools also started moving away from their core focus with the brilliant **Modus**, produced by Star Trek composer Jeff Russo, and Scandi-noir-inspired **Tallinn**, although they also delivered a huge dose of big-named percussion with ex Junkie XL's Tom Holkenborg Percussion.

Elsewhere in Hollywood scoring land, titles don't get bigger or more comprehensive than East West's **Hollywood Opus** which can deliver just about every orchestral instrument ever.

As well as Baby Audio, there have been plenty of other notable releases by newer companies. Pulsar Audio are just one of the companies helping to turn Grenoble into France's equivalent of Berlin in terms of the city's contribution to audio software. So far they're treading an emulation path but their **1178** is a magnificent recreation of Urei's 1178 compressor. Minimal Audio, too, are newbies but following less emulation-led paths and their **Rift** is quite simply one of the best distortion plugins we've used.

2021 could also be seen as the year of new ranges. Focusrite's **FAST plugins** now number four titles and all offer AI assisted processing to take the strain out of mixing. SSL, too, launched a range of plugins based around their legendary hardware. **Fusion Vintage Drive** and **Stereo Image** join a vast range of native SSL plugins, but bring the saturation and image processing from the hardware Fusion rack to a DAW near you and will soon be joined by three more Fusion titles.

Talking of ranges, Arturia's **FX Collection 2** delivers all of the bundles of plugins 'you will actually use' to make one ultra bundle of 22 effects. Think V Collection… for effects. And of course, said V Collection saw an update, with an additional four instruments, although IK Multimedia's **Syntronik** platform and Korg's **Collection** series of synths are both offering increasing competition in the vintage synth emulation stakes.

PLUGINS

WINNER

BABY AUDIO SPACED OUT

With only a few standout soft synth releases in 2021, it was instead the year of effects, with the trend being to move away from hardware emulations and push the boundaries of effect design. Our winner does just that, while also invoking the sound and feel of a classic – the best of both worlds, you could say, and definitely out of both of them. Baby Audio's Spaced Out is a Space Echo reimagined and it's been hailed as one of the most creative effects around, with delays, modulation and some incredibly lush sounds.

2021'S FINEST STUDIO GEAR

The things that we lump into the broad category of 'studio gear' – monitors, headphones, interfaces and accessories – aren't necessarily the most exciting purchases, but they also tend to be absolutely essential to our music making. It might be hard to get too excited about a new budget interface or mid-sized set of monitors, but these are some of the most widely needed – and purchased – categories of gear, so it's hardly surprising that more and more brands are getting in on the action.

"IT'S UNSURPRISING MORE BRANDS ARE GETTING IN ON THE ACT"

UA's Volt range might be 2021's closest thing to a 'sexy' interface, but there have been other impressive entrants this year too. Arturia's new **MiniFuse** interfaces offer a broad range of features and quality bundled software. Audient, meanwhile, maintain their reputation for offering high quality at affordable prices with the excellent MkII updates to the **iD4** and **iD14**. Away from the budget level, ever-reliable interface makers Focusrite continued to deliver with the updated **Clarett+** range, while newcomers to the interface sphere Black Lion Audio impressed us with the all-round quality of their **Revolution 2x2** unit.

Newcomers to the monitor realm, Output's Barefoot collaboration **Frontier** stood out this year thanks to a winning combination of eye-catching design and impressive mid-range detail. Regular names continued to impress too, such as M-Audio, whose **BX3** and **BX4** offered excellent value and PreSonus, whose **Eris E3.5** monitors really punched above their sub-£100 price point to offer a great solution for small studios.

The year's most impressive monitors came from Focal though, whose **Alpha 65 EVOs** combined a subtly stylish design with a sonic quality that's hard to beat at their mid-level price point.

As for studio headphones, Austrian Audio's **Hi-X65** are an impressive pair of mid-level studio cans offering excellent detail and separation. For something genuinely unique, Danish brand AIAIAI's **TMA-2** range brings a modular build-your-own solution that lets users design Bluetooth cans around their own specifications.

Our favourite mics of the year came courtesy of Lewitt Audio, whose **LCT 140** stereo pair offered a simple but flexible pencil mic bundle, and JZ, whose C12-inspired **Vintage 12** combines a gorgeous retro look with great sound and sneaks in as a late-in-the-year highlight.

While their Volt interfaces were Universal Audio's highlight of 2021, it's also worth a mention for the US brand's smart DSP-powered range of **UAFX** pedals. Despite being late-comers to the stompbox game, the trio were immediately impressive with vintage studio style and sonics.

STUDIO GEAR

WINNER

UNIVERSAL AUDIO VOLT INTERFACES

The budget interface sphere is one of the most crowded markets in music making. It's also a space where it's hard to innovate. Decent budget interfaces offer some ins, some outs, do it well and do it cheap. That's all there is to it. Kudos to UA then, for creating something that genuinely stands out. Not only do the Volt interfaces look incredibly smart, but the addition of a simple, all-analogue 'vintage' preamps and 1176-style compressor make for a set of interfaces that are appealingly intuitive and incredibly useful.

THE YEAR IN EURORACK

Although the ADDAC **112** is our pick of the year for modules, others stood out too. Following the general trend of granular's popularity is Mutable Instruments **Beads**, the successor to the equally popular Clouds, which takes the original concept and makes it neater and smaller.

Erica Synths have had an impressive year with consistently impressive modules. While the **Black Series 2** as a whole offers many great offerings, we feel that the **Matrix Mixer** is something that could benefit any modular synthesist. It offers so much potential for sound designers and could make patch teardown anxiety a thing of the past. Being able to store patches from any and all different modules, adapt them and instantly recall them is something that has only really existed for desktop or standalone players. This was a close call for first place but the ADDAC 112 wins out purely for its sonic capabilities as an instrument.

Much conversation has been had about choosing a format to delve into when it comes to modular synths, with forums and user groups expounding the virtues of each. The various exponents could be a step nearer to finding some common ground though, as Buchla and Tiptop Audio announced their joining of forces for the **200 Series** Eurorack modules. The system is sparsely populated at the moment, with just six modules released this side of New Year, including sound sources, voltage controllers and function generators. Having the classic Buchla tones and workflows in Eurorack format is something special, so we look forward to these new sonic opportunities growing.

> "MUCH DISCUSSION HAS BEEN HAD"

Buchla may be one of the big names but they aren't alone in making waves this year. Moog, while quiet on the new module front, have made some very appealing packages using their massively popular Mother format. While the instruments aren't new, the **Sound Studio** bundles are and don't just arrive as a box of existing products but include mixers and accessories that make for a fantastic entry into the world of Moog in an easy-to-palate system. Better still, these can easily be expanded, or added to existing Eurorack rigs. Anything that helps drive artists to explore modular, or new areas of sound creation, is a very good thing.

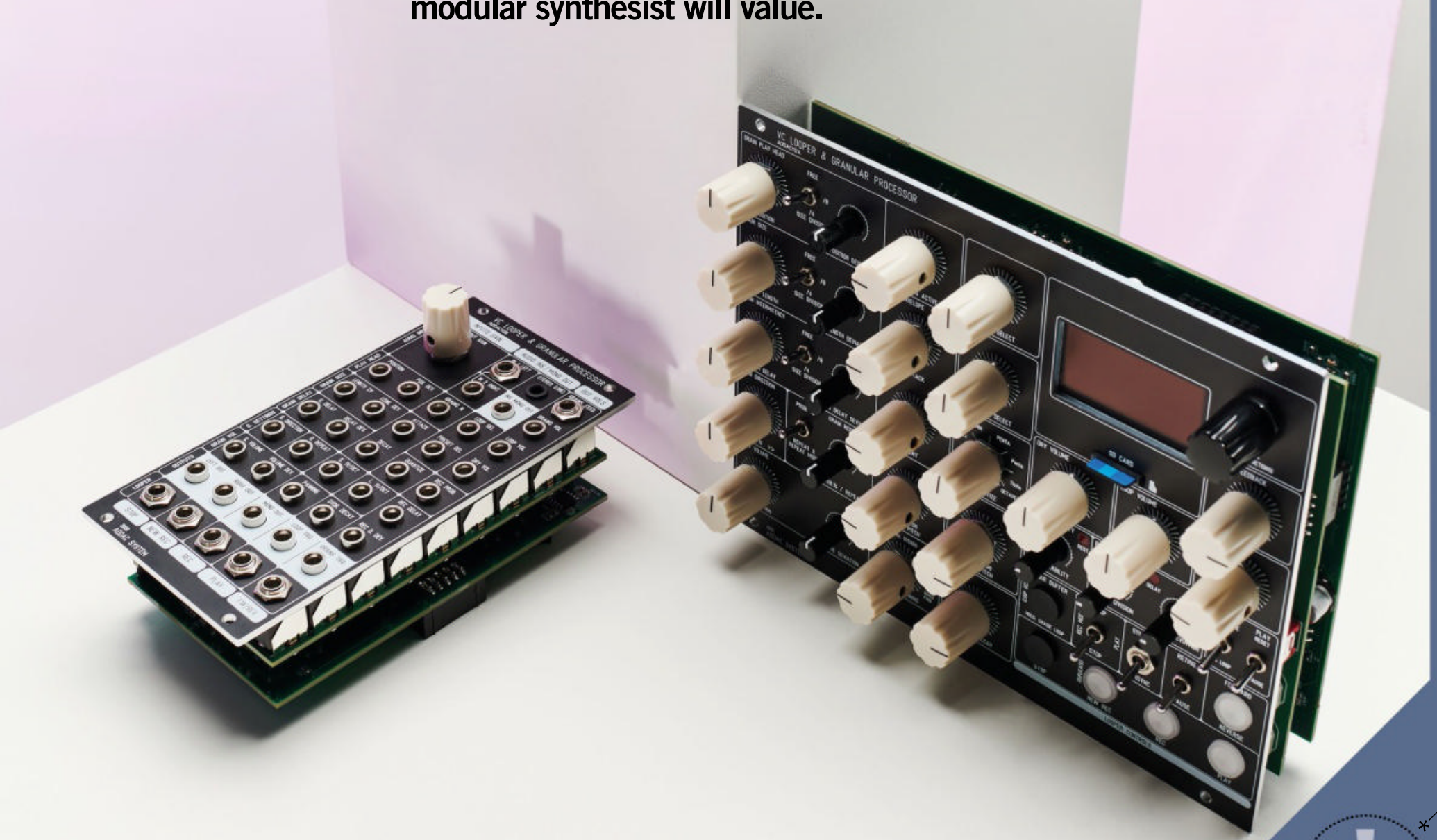
Our other close contender for the top spot is the wonderful **Metropolix** from Intellijel. This jam-focused sequencer builds on the existing Metropolis, adding so much extra functionality, from an extra track to the superb, game changing accumulator, to an OLED display which aids in the instant playability of the module to a range of functions accessible on the fly, keeping with tradition while introducing truly remarkable sequencing capability.

MODULAR

WINNER

ADDAC SYSTEM 112

ADDAC's take on granular synthesis is a standout module from this year, for a couple of reasons. Firstly for the layout – which is clear and concise, making it powerful and intuitive. Secondly for the sound design possibilities, which make it such a valuable tool. The long buffer times, visual feedback and huge array of control, via faceplate and CV, make this looper/granular synth a real powerhouse, that any modular synthesist will value.



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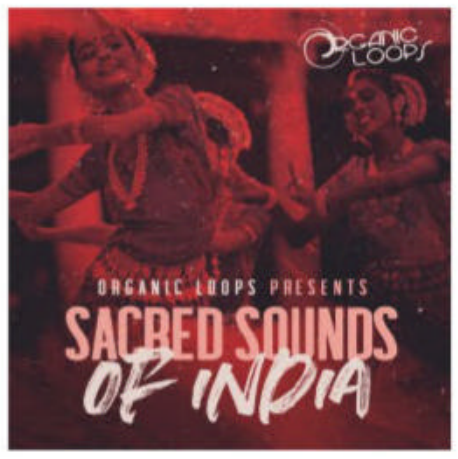

MT GEAR OF THE YEAR 2019 WINNER

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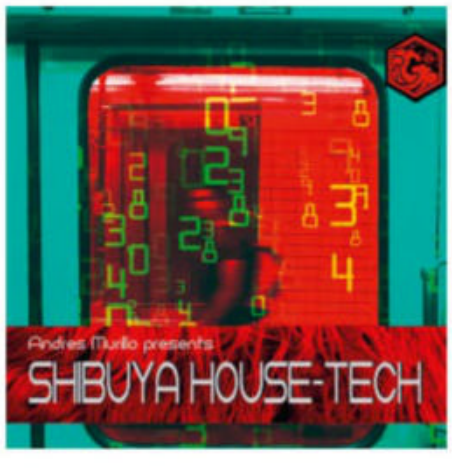

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NIGHTMARES ON WAX

Due to a health scare and enforced DJing sojourn, Nightmares on Wax's George Evelyn was forced to totally re-evaluate his life and craft. **Danny Turner** learns more

When George Evelyn released Nightmares on Wax's debut album *A Word of Science; The First and Final* chapter on Warp Records in 1991, he could not have envisaged that he'd still be signed to the label 30 years later. In between, he's been a pioneering force on the downtempo scene, shaping, defining and blending elements of electronica, jazz, hip-hop, dub, funk, soul and techno on classic albums such as *Smokers Delight*, *Carboot Soul* and *In a Space Outta Sound*.

However, after decades of DJing and touring, the pandemic finally gave Evelyn space to pause and re-evaluate his history, while a health scare simultaneously forced him to seriously reflect on his next step. Questioning whether this might be his last album, *Shout Out! To Freedom...* was infused with an added sense of urgency. The result is clearly Nightmares on Wax's most personal and expansive album to date, forged through collaboration and a renewed perception of his craft.

"WE'VE GROWN UP TOGETHER... IT'S BEEN A BIT OF A FAIRYTALE"

How do you feel about being officially Warp Record's longest serving signing?

"Being a fan of the label, it's amazing to watch how it's evolved and grown. At the beginning we were going around to clubs trying out test pressings and I often wonder how everything's gone from that to this. We've grown up together and it's been a bit of a fairytale. I don't think any of us envisaged Nightmares on Wax still being on the label, but I definitely accept my importance to Warp and the label's importance to me."

30 years into your career, it was surprising to hear you say that you feel you've been set free and become who you really are. What provoked that realisation?

"As you evolve as an artist you become a lot more observant about life. Along the way, you can become a little bit too analytical about what you're doing and that can imprison you, especially coming from the angle of being a perfectionist. Part of being a creative and mastering your craft is having peaks and troughs and going down rabbit holes, but at some point you have a sense of realisation and end up wondering what made your magic moments so good. I thought about what made writing certain songs so easy and why all the others felt like puzzles. Throughout lockdown I had the time and space to analyse all of that and what I learnt was to just get out of the way and let creativity happen. The music doesn't have to be anything, so just make it and stop worrying about whether it has to fit anywhere. I also asked myself the biggest question; is it any good?"

How do you go about getting an answer to a question that's so subjective?

"I've been in situations where I've worked on projects, really gone to town on them and right at the end that question's come into my head – and it's really uncomfortable. What I feel I've learned now is that the creativity was always there from the beginning but without the acquired knowledge. When you acquire a certain amount of knowledge it has an effect on you, which can be good or bad. It's no longer about having all these tools and needing to use them, you just need to remember why you love making music, be a kid again, have fun and just play. As long as you're creating, you're mastering your craft, and all that questioning set me free in some sense and I found that really empowering."

Would you say that you've had to go through something of a process of unlearning?

"Totally. Like I said at the beginning, it's learning to get out of the way. In simple terms, if you go to play on a keyboard, don't think about what you're going to play, just play it. Especially as I come from a sampling background, which was all about experimentation, manipulation and imagining what I could do with a sound. Back in the day I was like a mad scientist, the studio had no soundproofing, I didn't know anything about transience and we didn't even use a compressor, yet the tunes sounded wicked, so how come I suddenly found myself going through a minefield to get a tune to sound boss? I've realised that when you acquire knowledge and gear, you're literally opening a can of worms. So I went down that path, but now I've come home to the bare basics."

Is that also a commentary on the DJ lifestyle and how it's so frantic that you rarely have the time to evaluate what you're doing?

"Once you start releasing albums, you start touring and once you start touring you end up in a cycle of finishing a tour, recovering from that, doing a DJ tour, making a compilation and starting the next album. Once I stopped still and realised I wasn't getting on a plane or didn't have to be anywhere, I had this space that enabled me to say, actually, I don't need all this gear and I can make music without having anything on my mind about where I've got to be. After doing four DJ sets a week in four different countries, that puts you in a totally different mindset. I can only speak for myself, but when you're in that routine, there's no way you can be fully invested in what you're writing. That's why I'm really proud of this album, because I know the honesty, balance and emotional connection is 100% there. I'm not saying I'm never going to DJ again, but this is where I want to be and I have to be more protective of my time now."

We understand that you had a health scare too?

"That happened in February this year when I had an operation for a suspected brain tumour. Building up to that, I'd already written a section of the album but was still waiting for all the pieces to fall together. What with the pandemic – the sense of everyone feeling trapped and being set free from my touring life – I found my family again, realised that I'd never really lived in my house and started to feel like the stuff

I was writing were actually cries of freedom. When the health scare happened, it was another thing I wanted to be free of."

Presumably that added an extra layer of reflection and urgency for you?

"The health scare gave me a massive rain check on what I'm doing and how time is the only currency you have, so it inspired me to do more. I didn't want to think of the worst case scenario, but I'd be sat in the studio and random thoughts would come into my head, like have you sorted your family out and could this be the last record you're ever going to make? A voice inside of me told me not to resist that, so I thought about how I'd feel if this really was the last record I was ever going to make and, if so, what would I make? It woke something up in me and I thought I'm going to go even deeper now and maybe create some healing out of this too. From that perspective, the album is dedicated to everybody who wants to be free of something. Thankfully, I'm still here today and don't really have an issue anymore, so I'm very grateful for that, but I'm also grateful for having had the experience."

With *Shout Out! To Freedom*... would you say that you've returned to the soulful dub/jazz sound you were originally associated with, albeit adding all those years of experience you mentioned?

"I would say that, but I've also got the access that I never had to other musicians. I feel like I'm at a stage in my journey where I can call upon the really high-level collaborators that I want to play on my records, whether that's big classical composers like Steven Bentley-Klein, saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings or vocalist Greentea Peng. It's taken me this long to do what I've always wanted to do. It's not that I've been held back from doing that, but I needed the experience, the time and the journey, and I can't go into a song now without thinking about the production being on a certain level. You can see from my back catalogue how orchestration has been a massive attraction for me, but sonically I feel I can achieve that on a much bigger level now, and fully realise what I've been suggesting all along."

"ORCHESTRATION HAS BEEN A MASSIVE ATTRACTION FOR ME"

You're not new to collaboration though?

"I've always collaborated with people. Robin Taylor-Firth has played keys with me for about 18 years and I've done string arrangement on tracks like *Les Nuits*. When I wrote *Carboot Soul* I remember feeling an overhang from *Smokers Delight*, which was a concept album. I wanted to do something that was completely different, which was a massive challenge, so I went to town on that record to break away from *Smokers Delight*. The influence of touring and using live musicians totally opened things up for me because I could actually sample them. So collaboration has always been there, but whereas I collaborated with people within my vicinity, I tend to think more broadly and on a global level now. Through that, I've found quite a lot of serendipity."

With collaboration, do you have a good idea of the result you want to achieve or do you prefer leaving things open to improvisation?

"It's different with each person. Haile Supreme was an artist that my friend's wife found on Spotify. They sent me a song called *Danjahrous* and I thought, I've got to get in touch with this guy. It turned out he was a fan of mine and lived in Brooklyn, and I was heading there in two weeks' time, so we hung out and it was like we'd been friends forever. He flew to Ibiza the following month and we wrote eight songs in five days and another bunch in November 2019."

The song *3D Warrior* is a fine example of lots of collaborators coming together, but then never actually meeting...

"To give you some history on that, basically I'll go digging for records from all over the world and at some point sit in my studio and just loop stuff all day and jot down notes when I'm travelling. In May 2019, my jazz drummer Wolfgang Haffner came over from Germany and spent a day freestyling drums over my loops, leaving me with loads of sketches that I could write songs to or give to my

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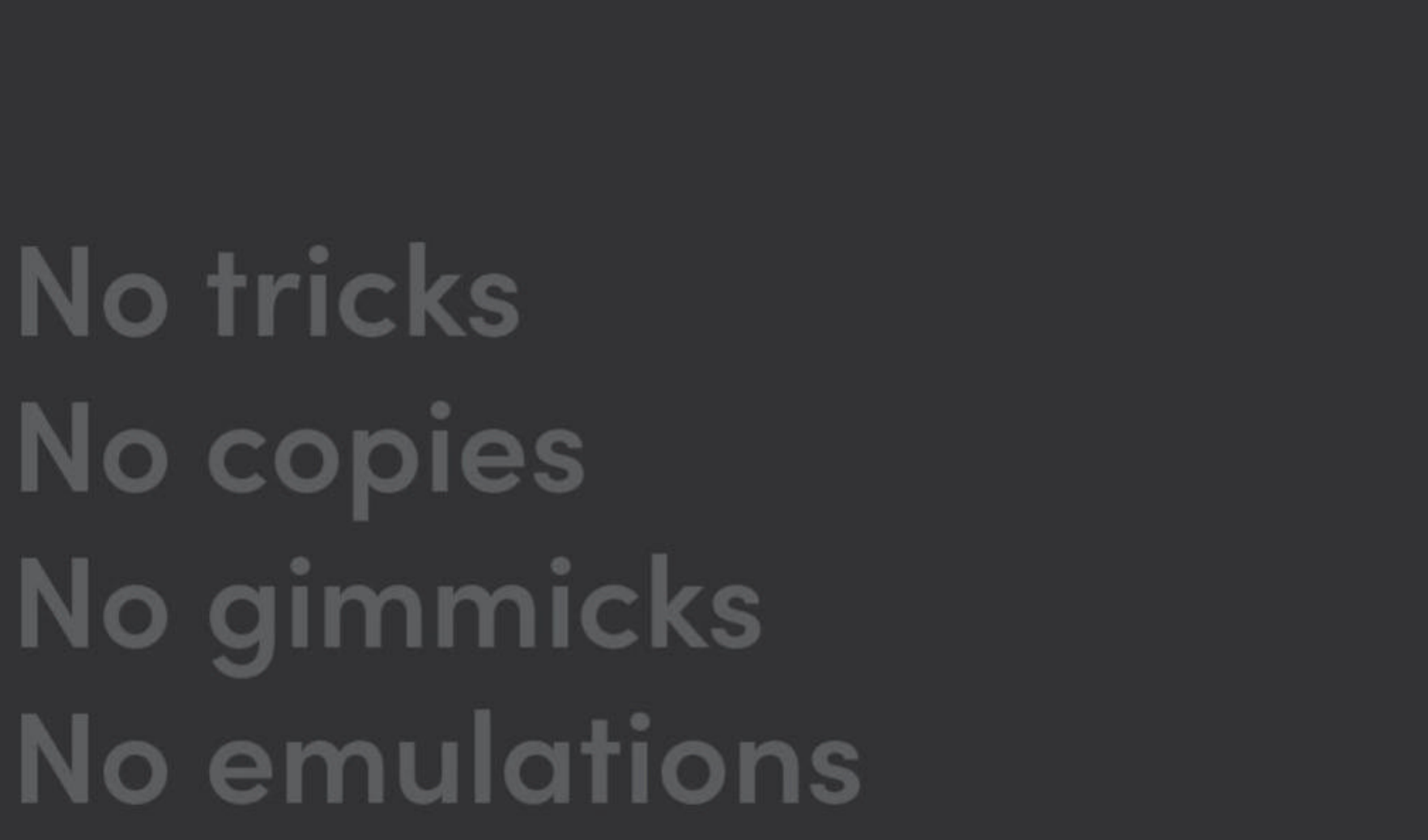


AUDIENT

You can't unhear quality

keyboard player. For *3D Warrior,* I'd been recording with Wolfie all day and he was sat at his drum kit making tribal beats and lost himself on a loop for about 11 minutes, which I thought was really something else. Then in October, I went to Leeds to record some keys with JD73 and bass with Alex Beans and we pulled up Wolfie's track and came up with this mystic eastern keyboard rhythm. Then in November, we were in the studio with Haile Supreme and he started talking about how we all live in this 3D reality and everybody needs to be a warrior to exist in this world, and that's where the theme came from."

Who added the saxophone arrangement?

"The Shabaka Hutchings opportunity came in December. I told him I had these three different scenarios, put a rough arrangement together, sent it to him to perform his magic and then gave everything to Haile to squeeze into a session that he was already working on for me. The recording came through on the morning of my 50th birthday while I was sat on the beach in the Maldives and I couldn't wait to work on it – I just had so much gold to work with. Now when I listen back to the track, I can't believe it was made in four different places. It's so against how I would normally make music and none of the musicians had even met each other."

Having worked with samples for so long, do you think that experience helped you to pull all those disparate sessions together and create the track?

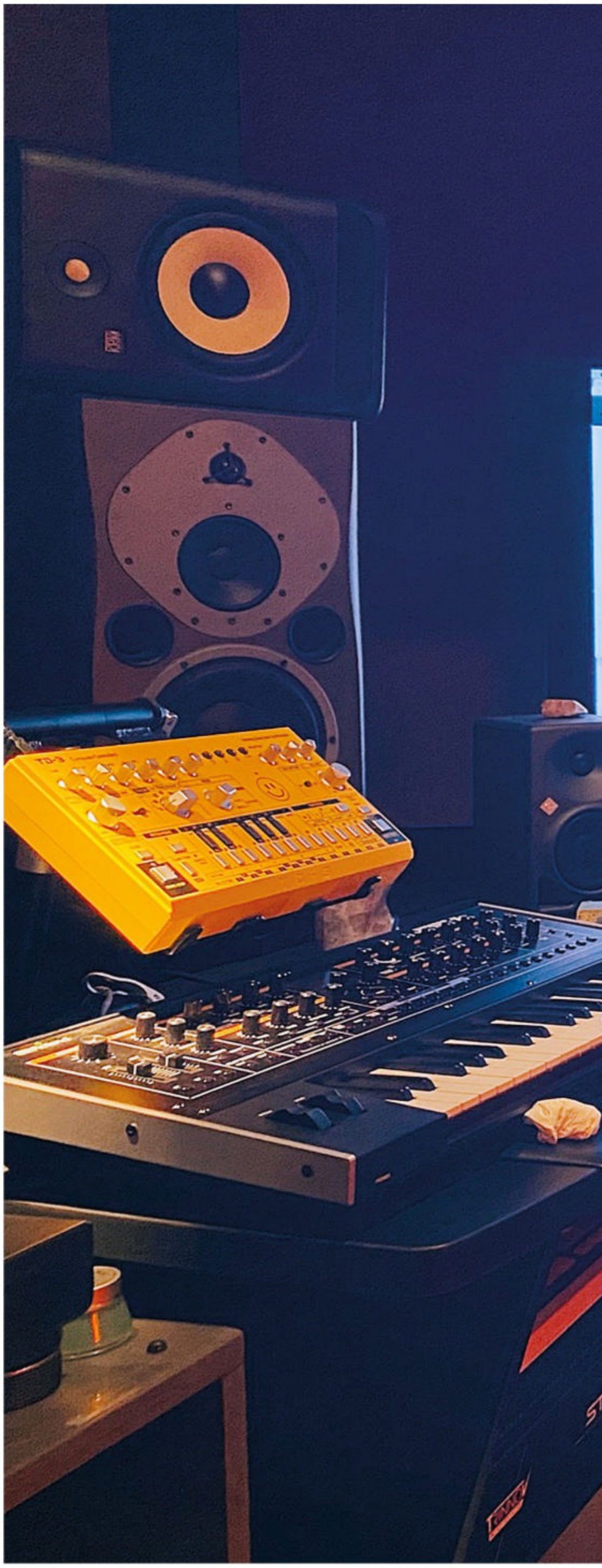
"I've obviously tried working with different producers and know that my process is very different because I don't turn up with something that's finished. All of my collaborators go on a journey with me and don't know where I'm going. I just know what I need, and when I've got enough material I'll go away and do the alchemy. There's no denying that my approach to making music comes from hip-hop. It doesn't matter what style of music I make, whether it's a house track or something acoustic, the mentality is to deconstruct and manipulate combined elements."

Have your ideas about sampling changed in this process?

"To me, sampling is more about what I think I can hear than what I can hear. I'll get a pile of obscure shit from Malaysia or India, get stoned, spend a day throwing records on, record the first thing that's catching me and at some point later something will pop out. Sometimes I'll chop a sample up, build the music around it with live musicians and remove the sample, so I've only used it to inspire me. On a track like *Up To Us*, it's just a straight two-bar guitar sample, but the original sounded so hypnotic and there was a sense of suspense because of the crackle and sound of the cabinet it was recorded in. I knew it wouldn't sound the same if I tried to recreate it. In that case, I used the sample and brought in orchestration and drums to make something else."

How did you discover Greentea Peng, and was her vocal contribution on *Wikid Satellites* recorded remotely too?

"I'm a music fan first, then a DJ, then a producer. I'm still listening to people because I want to be inspired, and when I heard Greentea I thought she's got shit to say. The colour in her voice is beautiful, but it's also about the content and feeling. I sent her a folder of stuff and we did a bit of back and forth, then it went from text messages to voice notes. We went on like that for eight months before we even spoke to each other."



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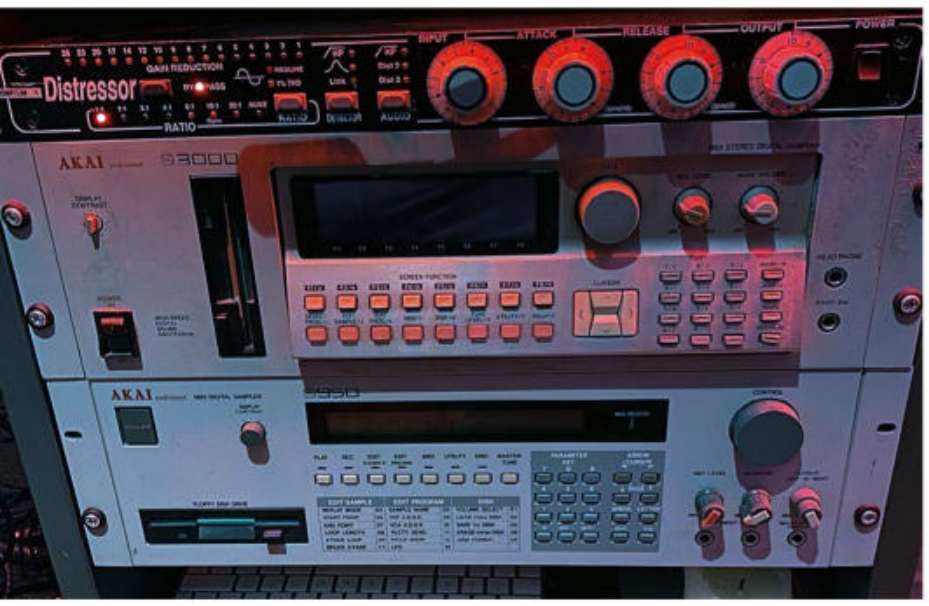
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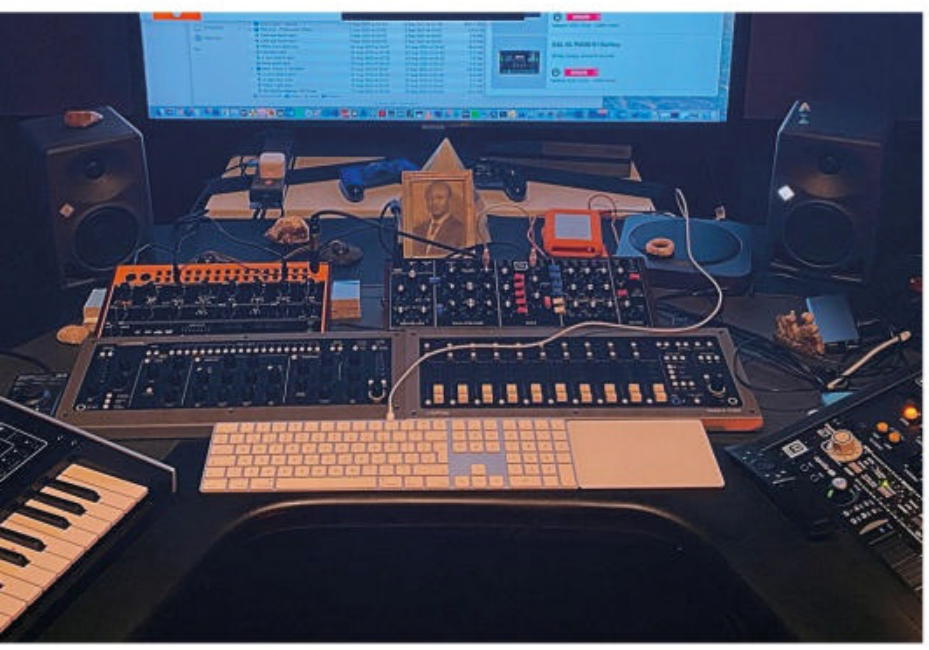


Some of those voice notes feature on the track *GTP Call*?
"She called me a cheeky bastard because she didn't even know that was on there until a month ago, but it's good to capture all of that because it's real. All albums are a mirror; you remember where you were at certain points in your life and how you were feeling. When I'm writing music in album mode, certain feelings and moments become familiar and that's when you know you're on the right path. Everything starts gravitating towards the centre, the things you were really buzzing about get pushed to one side and you suddenly have this musical spine."

How have you found the process of piecing together other musicians' live recordings?
"The only actual live playing I wasn't present for was the wind and string instruments. I trust the people I'm working with and when I set up a session I tend to only use one microphone anyway, which takes me to a certain stage before I lose myself down a rabbit hole trying to get the right sounds and textures. I mixed some of the album myself and got the rest to a certain level before giving it to Philip Harris to mix. I went so deep with the record that I thought it would be good to get a fresh set of ears to take it to another plane, so I've got to credit Philip for that."

"I MIX WHILE WRITING; IT NEEDS TO SOUND LIKE I'M IMAGINING IT"

The tracks are quite sparse-sounding but you seem very adept at colouring the sound to fill up the mix…
"As somebody said to me years ago, space is the place – how much can you create? When I think about all my favourite productions or the songs I really love, they're really simple. I'm still working on that, but then I'm always learning different tricks. In the early days I'd learn how to do drum fills, but then I'd put a drum fill on every track until I realised I didn't have to keep on doing that *[laughs]*. It's the same with writing songs, how can you say a lot by saying little or how can a mid-section get from one place to another without too much going on yet still feeling like it's progressing. So I'm very aware of the question I'm asking and I definitely spend more time learning how to take things away, but that's a journey in itself."

Do you rely on specific tools to plump/colour the sound?
"In lockdown, I sat in my studio, looked around and decided what I no longer needed. I felt I needed to do some research and see what's out there, so I got rid of my TLA Audio analogue desk, which I'd had for 15 years, and went for a Softube Console 1 Fader setup, which gives me British Class A and SSL 9000 definition. Then I looked at my AC converters and called on a good friend who's got a mastering studio out here and he introduced me to Burl Audio equipment, which has been a massive help. Before that, I'd used UAD and MOTU, but I struggled to get something to sound 'ten past two' and the Burl Audio B2 Bomber has really made the difference alongside the B80 Mothership AD/DA interface which has got the in/outs, mic pres and an amazing BNC clock. I thought that upgrading everything would sound better, but for depth, transience, space and things staying where I put them, it's been a game changer, although I've still got the UAD Apollo 8 for my DSP, plugins and stuff."

And what point in the writing process will you implement these tools?
"I tend to mix while I'm writing because it needs to sound like I'm imagining it. I know that some people just write stuff and mix afterwards, but I find that irritating and this technology has shifted things for me because everything sounds exactly how I want it to now. At the end of the chain I've got the Tegeler Audio Crème unit for EQ/compression and that combination of outboard glues everything together and has speeded everything up for me. What I like about Burl Audio and Tegeler is that you can ring up the guys who built and made this shit and actually talk to them about the different ways to saturate, route and use their mic pres. It's very hard to find someone at these companies to talk to these days – and I'm not talking about sales reps, but people who actually use the gear and are passionate about it."

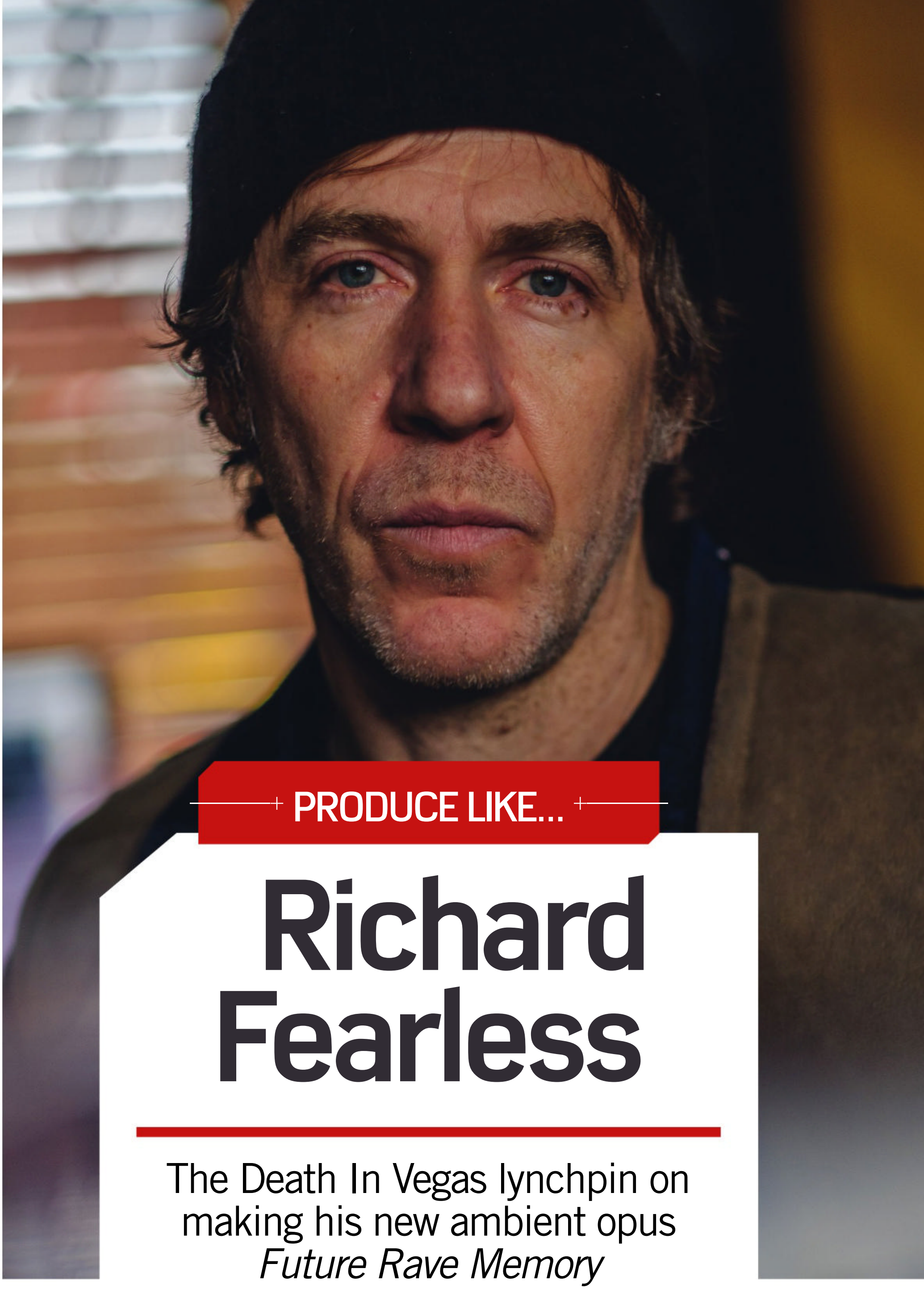
Do you have any other hands-on hardware?
"I've got the Roland Jupiter-Xm, which is a really cool keyboard that still has the Juno-106 modules, my 808, which is about to go into service, and a couple of little toys like the Moog Minitaur, which is amazing for bass sounds. I've also just invested in a Behringer Model D and I still use my Akai S3000 and NI's Maschine studio, although I'm kind of slipping away from that a little."

So you're still using vintage samplers?
"When I started using samplers it was literally the Atari ST, a mother keyboard and an Akai S950. We'd buy boxes of floppy disk sounds, so that and sampling was our library back then, but I still like the writing process of using a sampler and a keyboard. On the software side, I still use Logic and find that Serato Sample is really good. Loopcloud is also great if I've got a vocalist in here and need to move quickly and pull up a beat. Softube software is really good, especially Parallels for synth soundscapes and their bass plugin Monoment Bass."

This is actually your second studio in Ibiza?
"I used to live in a 17th century farmhouse, but seven or eight years ago I moved to a villa on the top of a mountain. This is the first ever studio where the room was built for me bespoke. It was an empty shell when I moved in and the way it's built now, there's a mini apartment here for musicians to stay in. It's definitely the best studio I've ever had – it's called the Othership, because it's where the other shit happens!" FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Nightmares on Wax's *Shout Out! To Freedom...* is out now on Warp Records. For more information, visit **nightmaresonwax.bandcamp.com/album/shout-out-to-freedom**

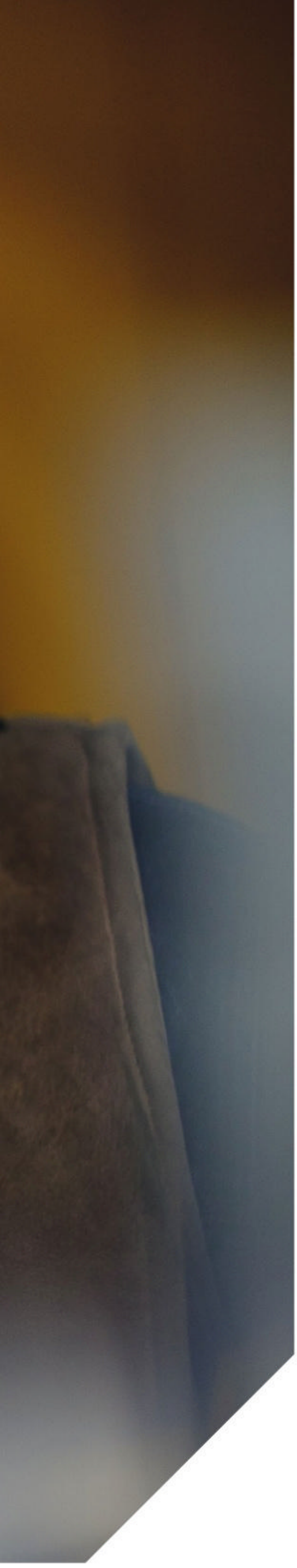


PRODUCE LIKE...

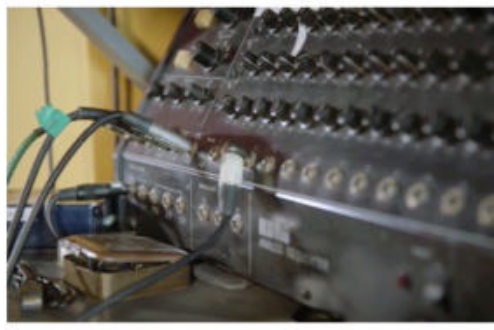
Richard Fearless

The Death In Vegas lynchpin on making his new ambient opus *Future Rave Memory*

© Kevin Lake



Re-evaluating the hours he spent in his studio post-lockdown has made Richard see the space in a new light



Richard Fearless has been releasing electronic music since the mid-'90s, but for most of that time he's been best known for his collaboration-heavy, genre-hopping project Death In Vegas.

Following an initial string of white labels, he released his first album under the name Richard Fearless in 2019. Decidedly more machine-focused, that album – *Deep Rave Memory* – saw the producer stripping his sound back to its rawest elements, combining ambient washes of analogue synth with swirling delays lines, acid-techno bass riffs and cavernous drums.

Last month Richard Fearless returned with a companion album, *Future Rave Memory*. Produced once again in his Thames-side Metal Box studio, and created with the same array of analogue hardware, this latest LP sees Fearless stripping away the 'club' elements of its predecessor and focussing on the ambient elements of his sound.

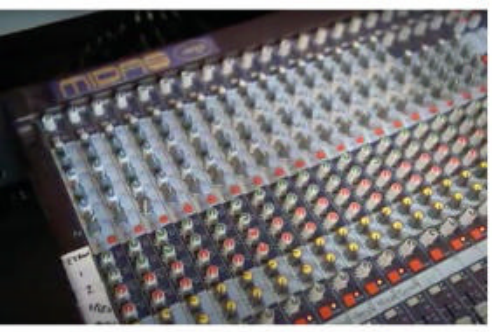
The result is a mesmerising instrumental album that draws emotive inspiration from the past year of pandemic and the death of close friend Andrew Weatherall. We met up with Richard in London to find out more...

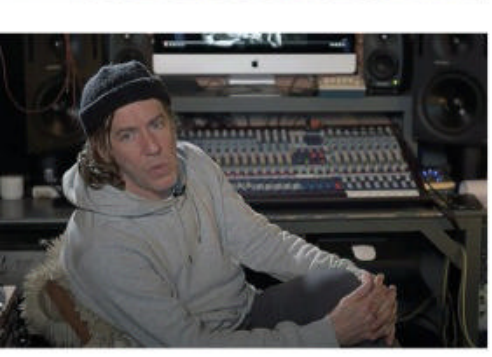
How do you consider what you do as Richard Fearless as different to Death In Vegas?

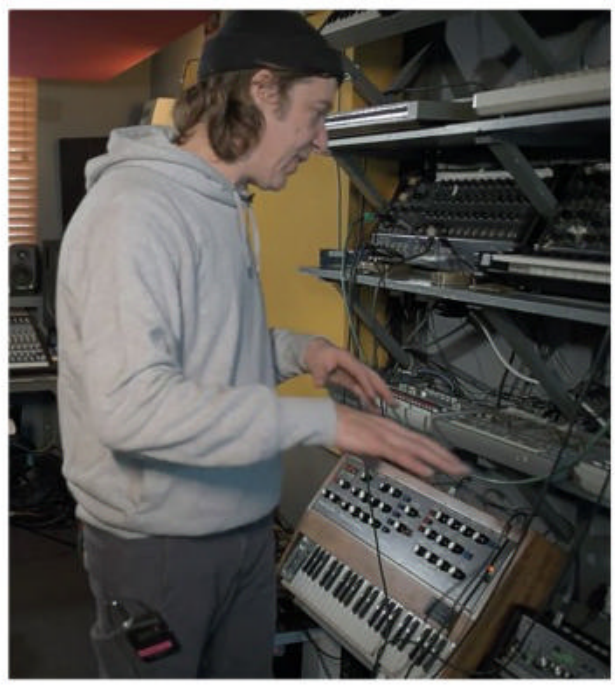
"That's an interesting question. I am the same person and I've pretty much used the same equipment for the last 25 years – apart from a bit of outboard gear – but certainly with Death in Vegas I try and flip a switch in my head a bit.

"With Richard Fearless, originally it was just something that I would put out on white labels. What I wanted was to come into the studio and get everything ready, all my drum machines and synths, and do everything in one take. That was the rough idea with Richard Fearless – being a lot more instinctive and visceral. Not putting too much thought in. Going with the initial instinct and putting down jams.

"That way of working became so appealing to me that I decided that was how I wanted to work all of the time. The only thing I've done differently from there is







In recent years, Richard's setup is built around the idea of immediacy and live performance techniques

adding a live console, which has added even more of a performance element when putting the mixes down.

"It's taken me 30 years to get to this point. Honestly, I've only really liked the last few records I've done. It's taken me that long to hone my skills and have confidence in my work. I think not being a straight-up musician throws a spanner in the works."

Are you mostly a 'sequencer'-type producer, then?

"Definitely, because I can kind of take my time with it. Most things start with a sequencer. As I've said, I've had this equipment since the *Contino Sessions* but it's only been since being here in Metal Box that I've had everything running live."

And you purposefully set it up so that you have access to everything?

"I spent some time thinking about how I was going to do it. I ended up going down this route of using the ACME-4. That's the sync box for everything. At first it was hard getting things to lock in, but the ACME really helped.

"It's made by SND who also made my SSM-16 sequencer. They're both made by the same guy, Sebastian. I think Florian Schneider was involved with that company too. He built a lot of stuff for Kraftwerk.

"I can get a sequence for any synth – for example, the Juno is currently linked to the SAM-16 – change the timing of it, put individual swing onto each thing. It's a really organic way of working and it's a really great system."

"IT ISN'T EASY TO KEEP PEOPLE'S ATTENTION FOR 15 MINUTES"

Tell us about your two recent albums – *Deep Rave Memory* and *Future Rave Memory*. What's the relationship between those two?

"After years of Death in Vegas, what with that having such a history and so many collaborations, I felt it was important to do something that was more reflective of me as a DJ and artist. But while I was doing it I was putting down some ambient mixes and ended up thinking 'man this works really well', I could carry this over onto other sounds and thought 'OK, there's another record in here'.

"Then with the shit we've all gone through, I wasn't able to go into the studio as much because I was needed at home. It was actually kind of nice to come in less. I valued it more. It's become kind of a healing place to be. I was lucky that I could channel everything with this record. It became this cathartic thing, my own way of dealing with how I feel currently."

How much of the album existed pre-lockdown?

"Some tracks are reworkings of tracks on *Deep Rave Memory*. I wanted to be another version of it – a *Future Rave Memory* of the *Deep Rave Memory*. I didn't want to do that just by taking the drums out. I wanted to keep pushing the songs until I was in a happy place with them.

"The last track on that album *Our Acid House* was actually written on the day that I found out Andrew Weatherall had died. Dan [Daniel Avery – who works in the next door studio] and I were both working that day and Dan did a piece unbeknownst to me. We both used to have studios around where Andrew was and we were close to him. It floored us."

Do you find it harder to work on ambient, beatless tracks?

"There's a lot of dialogue about ambient music and artists where people say it's super easy to do. On some level it definitely is, but what isn't easy to do is keep someone's attention for 15 minutes. That, to me, means there needs to be narration in the song; every sound and effect part needs to work around what's already been put down.

"That level of depth isn't easy to do. My biggest fear is that people say 'it's good but fuck me, it goes on a bit'. There has to be a journey in each song, and definitely throughout the album."

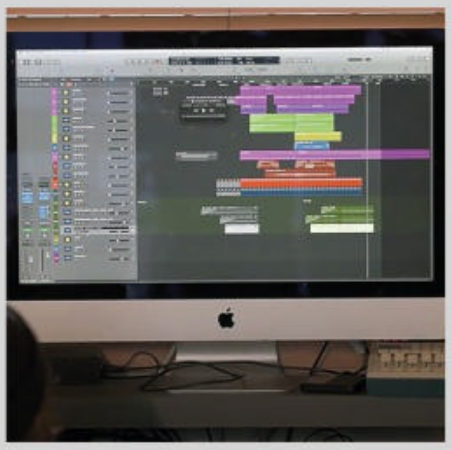
GET THAT SOUND...

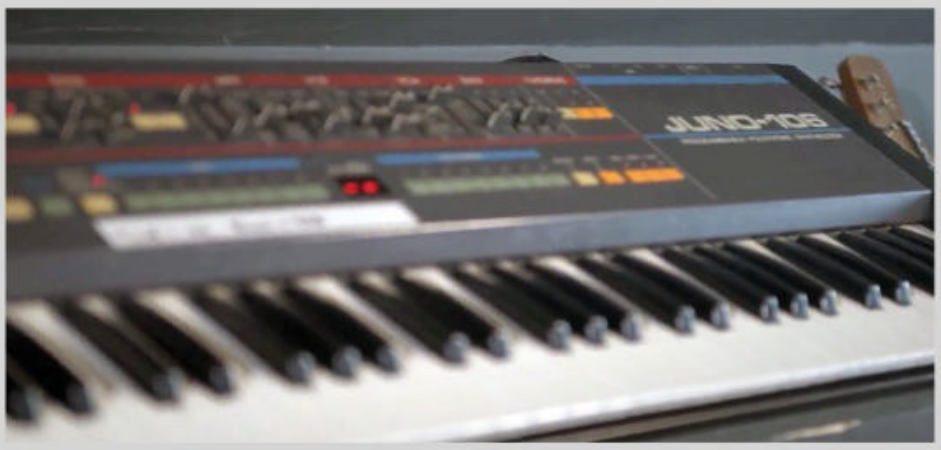
How Richard layered feedback loops for the outro of *Our Acid House*

VIDEO ON FILESILO

01 >

Our Acid House is the emotive final track of the album, inspired by the death of Andrew Weatherall. Richard also wanted to create a transitional ending. "I knew I was going straight into recording a Death In Vegas album after this, so I wanted something that felt like passing the baton from one project to the other." He achieved this by creating an epic build of heavily processed feedback.





02 >

It starts with a pad-like sound from Roland Juno. "The actual sound started as a synth line. I reamped it through my [Vox] AC30. I used two Neumanns to stereo mic the amp," Richard explains. "I think I used a Hiwatt Fuzz pedal and the Sansamp. The great thing about those pedals is that you can get a bit more control over the distortion."

03 >

Richard then layers up the distorted feedback with a second, modulated version. "I have a tremolo version on top of the feedback. That tremolo was done in the box. It's then going to the Effectron and Lexicon."

04

Richard then processes it further still. "You can hear the Marshall Time Modulator, bringing that metallic element to the sound." By adding multiple layers and reprocessing, Richard builds a My Bloody Valentine-like wall of noise. "It's just a case of reprocessing again and again and building up and up."

RICHARD FEARLESS TRACK BUILDER...

Ambient techno tips – from sequencing to dub-style mixes

BEGINNINGS

VIDEO ON FILESILO

"The first thing I do is put some kind of clock down. I'd normally start with my 606 or the 909. The benefit of the 909 is I've got everything split out individually so I can have more control. For example, I'll get a hi-hat pattern going and then put a bit of reverb on it from the Lexicon, and then some delay. I like to use two effects at the same time to get a wider sound.

"A lot of my tracks I'll build up in that way, adding layers on top of layers. Once I've got it to a certain point then I start taking stuff out until I'm just leaving the bare bones."

CREATING SEQUENCES

"A lot of work comes down to building different sequences. For example, I might get a rough rhythm going with the MS-20. I usually use the MS-10 with that, which I love. A lot of people find it horrible to use. The slightest tweak can make it sound wrong; there are basically no locked points [on the pitch controls] so it's quite hard to get the right notes. But some of my best work, I think, has come from that sequencer.

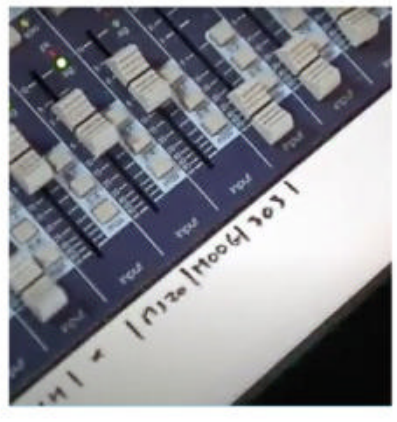
"The main sequencer that I use is the SAM-16. As a non-musician I tend to write most of my stuff using sequencers, it's an easier way for me to get notes down. I've had the SAM about three years now and I think it's actually been used on pretty much every track I've done since then."

> "I WANT IT TO FEEL LIKE THESE MACHINES ARE ALIVE"

SYNTH LINES

"The 303 played a huge part on *Future Rave Memory*. It was essentially my main synth on it. I got it modded by Kenton a few years ago so I can have a bit more control of different aspects. Then I'll often hook it up to a keyboard so I can control it that way too. I'll use it to create multiple harmonic layers and have those playing off one another.

"I have one of the few MIDI Minimoogs, they're known as the Welsh Moogs [produced by Cardiff-based company Moog Music Limited, which acquired the name in the '90s]. I use the Moog a lot for tonal pads, and stuff like that."



CREATING ARRANGEMENTS

"What I'll tend to do is build up different melodies and sequences. Then when I'm happy with each part, I put each down individually. I'll do a long seven minute or so pass. That's why I never have an arrangement in mind before recording, but I'll create an arrangement with my passes, if that makes sense. I don't like to do too much editing. I'll build up a structure with each recording pass, letting each new one build off the last one."

MODULATION AND MOVEMENT

"One of the things that is very important to me is how lines work off each other. A lot of that comes down to using things like the [Deltalab] Effectron so much, and not having delays that are exactly locked in and done more by ear.

"When I talk about processing my stems once I've recorded them, what I'll do, for example, is send them through things like the Hiwatt Tube Tremolo pedal. When those modulation sounds aren't locked in, it starts to feel a lot more organic and that's what I want. I want to make it feel like these machines are alive and working off one another."

MIXING *FUTURE RAVE MEMORY*

"Mixing the album took a while. I was doing things differently to how I used to. With the studio running live, I would record a pass, put it down, layer them up with the effects chains. Once I had those stems, I'd put them through the console and re-run them through my effects to do live dub mixes – that kind of Conny Plank technique. Sometimes I'd end up going back to each track three or four times until I couldn't take it any further."

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Future Rave Memory is out now via Drone. Keep up with the latest from Richard Fearless and Death In Vegas at **droneout.co.uk**

The SAM-16 is a sequencer lover's dream... if you can find your way through its tricky manual

WHY I LOVE MY...

SND SAM-16 sequencer

VIDEO ON FILESILO

"As a non-musician, someone who's not really trained on any instruments, I do find sequencers are the easiest way to work. It's a really fun way of working too. It can be frustrating and you can spend hours not getting anything, but sometimes things come quickly.

"This sequencer is made by Sebastian Niessen at SND. It's a great piece to use. Normally I'll start with one note and then use the ACME-4 so I can mess around with the timing. Pretty much every song starts with that sequencer. It's the main brain in the studio.

"Unfortunately the manual is incredibly complex. I have an English translation from the German version. You can do a lot of creative things with it, but I think I use it in a fairly standard way and haven't really scratched the surface." FM

Generate new musical ideas in Ableton Live

How to maintain clarity of vocals while creating depth with reverb

On vocal tracks, sometimes it doesn't matter quite how hard you try to set the right amount of reverb, it just doesn't feel right. Adding in a tiny bit more and the vocals feel washed out, you take a bit off and it sounds too dry. It can seem impossible to find the right balance. When this happens, the perfect weapon can be sidechained reverb.

To do this, we add a compressor after the reverb device on a Return Track, or the "wet" chain inside an Audio Effect Rack, and use the vocals as the trigger of the sidechain to 'duck' the reverb down.

Since you can control this ducking with the parameters of the compressor, this technique can be useful to allow the use of some longer reverb tails to fill out spaces in a mix and create extra depth without the reverb overpowering and washing out the vocals.

For this example, we are going to use this technique inside an Audio Effect Rack that is inserted on the vocal track.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Disclaim is a London-based audio engineer, producer, educator and Ableton Certified Trainer. She offers both classroom and individual tuition for all levels and abilities. To find out more, visit: **annadisclaim.com**

01

Insert Hybrid Reverb onto the vocal track. Group the reverb device into an Audio Effect Rack. Open the Chain List in the rack and rename this chain to "Wet".

02

Create an additional Chain that you can rename to "Dry". This chain will have no time-based effects on it; however, you can use any other corrective effect devices on this chain that you would normally put onto the vocals (eg compressors, EQs, etc). If you have inserted these devices already in front of the Effect Rack, then this "Dry" chain can just stay empty.

03

On the "Wet" Chain, make sure you set the Reverb's Dry/Wet control to 100% Wet to ensure proper separation between the two Chains. You can try experimenting setting up a bit more decay and diffuse than usual since the reverb will be sidechained.

04

Insert a Compressor after the Reverb on the "Wet" Chain. Open the Sidechain section on the Compressor and enable External Sidechain. Now, choose the vocal track as the external source and choose Pre-FX as the external tapping point so no other effects you may have inserted will become part of the sidechain trigger source. Then you can set up the compressor parameters to your taste.

05

To control the balance between the "Wet" and "Dry" Chains inside the Rack, you can either use the Chain Volume controller slides or go to the Chain Selector editor and set up the chains so that you can use the Chain Selector as the Dry/Wet control between the chains. You can also map the Chain Selector to a Macro so you have easy access to it.

Roland TR-6S

Leo Maymind gives us a whirlwind tour of this slimmed-down TR-8S sibling, which, he argues, offers a fair amount of charm in its own right…

Roland's TR-6S has now been around for a few years, and while its big brother, the TR-8S, has received a lot of critical acclaim, the 6S has proven no slouch. Blessed with the exact same internal sound engine but boasting six instruments instead of the 8S's 11, the TR-6S packs a lot of punch in a very small, portable package. When you take into account that this little drum machine can draw power from either batteries or USB and has full digital audio streaming capabilities over USB as well, it's quite a powerful package.

Taking a quick glance at the specs of the machine can be a bit misleading, as the 6S features six instruments, each with its own dedicated volume fader. When an instrument is selected, the three knobs adjacent to the Volume knob control Tuning, Decay, and a dedicated control of your choice per instrument, which is set in the Kit Settings. The options for this handy Control Knob differ if your instrument is making use of one of Roland's ACB instruments, a Sample, or an FM synth voice. When no instrument is selected, these knobs control Reverb and Delay Levels, as well as a Master Effect control knob that's also user configurable. More on these later.

The 2.0 update Roland, released for both the 6S and 8S, added a full FM synth engine to the equation, albeit with limited control over parameters. However, some might see this as a blessing, not a curse, as fewer knobs to fiddle with also means that it's easier to stumble onto that sound that exactly fits the character set you want. And it'd be fairly easy to dismiss the FM engine in the 6S, given that it's somewhat locked behind a screen, but with the new editor Roland released in October 2021, that limitation is somewhat lifted. Given that entire kits can be made up of FM instruments, the FM possibilities in the 6S aren't as limited as first glance foretells.

The TR-6S features the typical Roland step sequencer, where steps are input via the 16 buttons at the bottom of the machine or via live input when the TR-6S is in Inst Rec mode. However the addition of substeps, flams, adjustable velocity (and more) per step mean the 6S is deeper than it looks. Ready to become a Roland master? Let's go!

10 ways to get more out of your Roland TR-6S

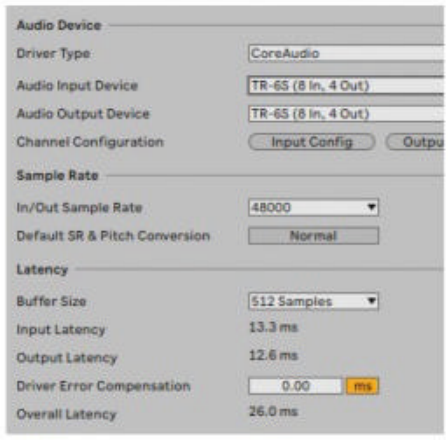
Small or large, the TR-6S is a Roland workhorse, through and through. Let's see why…

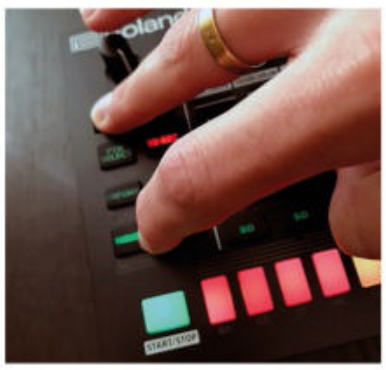
Colour us hooked

1 Make use of the TR-6S's ability to assign a colour per instrument for your custom kits in order to quickly remember what's saved where. Making all kick drums red, snares blue, hi-hats yellow, samples orange, etc give a quick colour reference that will aid in forming muscle memory when jamming. To assign colours to your instruments, press Shift + Kit to enter Kit Edit mode and scroll all the way to "Kit: Color". Each instrument can be assigned here. Just make sure to Save your Kit when done.

Two for one

2 The TR-6S has so much power as a drum machine, especially given its small footprint, that it's easy to forget that it can also function as an audio interface. While it doesn't have the external inputs and multiple outputs of the TR-8S, using the TR-6S as an audio interface still lessens the load that you need to carry to a gig. One limitation is that the main volume knob will control both the TR-6S volume and the volume of your digital audio, so you'll need to have some sort of software control of your DAW with you.





Motion sickness

3 In order to make the most of the TR-6S, it's essential to use the Motion Recording function, which can add tuning, decay, velocity and other changes to steps in your pattern. However, you need to make sure Motion is turned on, as it's turned off by default for some reason. Press Shift and Variation to access this option, and then use the Value knob to turn Motion to On.

Morph for less

4 One of the best ways to get the most mileage out of the custom mapping ability of the Control knob is to Assign it to Morph when using FM instruments. The Morph knob, named somewhat mysteriously to not give away exactly what it's doing behind the scenes, gives a lot of timbral control in one knob sweep and can take a sound from soft and neutral to bright and clangy. To assign Morph, choose one of your FM instruments and then go back to your Kit Edit menu by pressing Shift + Kit. Scroll to Kit:CTRL and you'll see each individual instrument with Morph being the last option in the list.

Master crowd control

5 If you're using the TR-6S as part of a live or DAWless setup, you'll want to be able to make large dynamic moves quickly to control the energy levels of your crowd. One of the best ways to do this is to assign the 'Noise' to the master effect slot. Now, when the Master FX are activated, the Control Knob will act as a frequency control for noise sweeps that add excitement over your beats. Turn the Control Knob all the way to the left to deactivate the noise completely. This can also be an interesting way to add sonic interest to your drum parts while recording as well.

Poly thriller

6 It's possible to create complex polyrhythmic beats on the TR-6S by setting different Last Step values for each instrument. To do this, press Shift and the Step Loop button to access the Last Step menu. If an Instrument is selected, choosing one of the 16 steps shortens the length of that instrument's loop. Use the Value knob to scroll to 'Edit Variation' to set the Last Step globally for all instruments in that Variation. In this way, you can create a few different Variations that use the same pattern but each have their own lengths.

Copy that

7 The Copy button works two ways. By pressing and releasing, you go to a Copy/Paste menu to duplicate Patterns, Variations, individual instrument tracks, Instruments, or full Kits. However, by holding down Copy, you can also access a quick copy/paste command for Tracks and Variations. Press Copy and the Variation you'd like to copy, then the one you'd like to paste. This creates a few versions of your main idea without losing it.

Filling good

8 The TR-6S features the ability to set one of the eight Variations as a Fill Pattern which can be triggered manually or can be set to go off every 2, 4, 8, 16, or 32 measures. However, editing these Fill Patterns can be a bit confusing using the standard technique, and many users seem to think they aren't editable at all. In order to access these, you can actually press Shift and Fill In Trig to get to the Fill Menu. Turn the dial around until it says Select on the screen, at which point you can assign a Variation, Fill 1 or 2, or the Scatter effect as your designated Fill setting for that particular pattern.

Get a Reload of this

10 Kit, instrument, and pattern reload is now possible with a two-button press, similar to the Reload function on the Elektron kit. Simply press Utility + Kit, Instrument, or Pattern Select to revert to the saved version of the item. Add extra snare hits and revert back quickly; change the pitch and timbre of your tom and revert back to neutral; the possibilities are endless and this feature gives the TR-6S a lot of live jamming possibility.

Drive smart

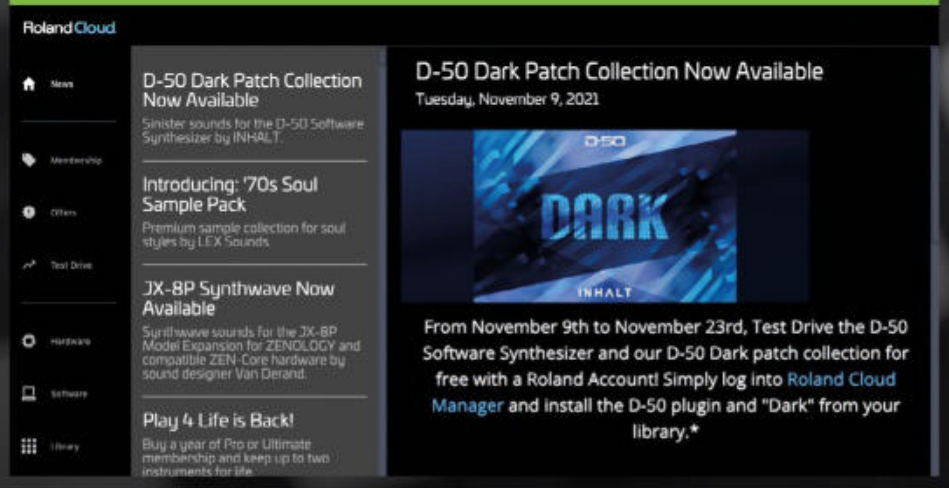
9 The TR-6S has an effect per instrument as well as a master effect per kit. Given that there are 16 effects total, four of which are different versions of distortion, there are a lot of ways to get dirty. It's important to understand the differences between the various Drive effects, as each has its own flavour. This is where the kit editor comes in especially handy (see the walkthrough over the page). Drive is the least extreme of all the choices, and comes with a two-band EQ that is both pre- and post-gain. This effect works well on nearly all of the instruments. Crusher, as you'd expect is really a bitcrusher and has a built-in filter. This one works great on hi-hats and other high frequency material. Next, Saturator is slightly less extreme than the Drive effect and has even more control. There's a Sensitivity threshold setting that's worth experimenting with, according to what sounds you're using. And finally, there's a Comp + Drive setting, which combines compression and overdrive into one effect.

Use Roland's new Editor to get deeper with kits

The newly released software for both the TR-6S and TR-8S let you control kits, patterns and more

01 >

You'll need to download the new TR Editor from Roland's Cloud software. After downloading, the TR Editor should auto-find your TR-6S. However, your machine will need to be updated to the latest 1.03 firmware in order to work with the Editor. Luckily, the TR Editor will do this for you if needed.



02 >

Upon opening the editor, you'll see a screen that has the Pattern and Kit name, along with five tabs at the top. The Overall tab is incredibly useful with the TR-6S, in that it shows you all of your kit's settings at once.

03 >

Click on the Instrument Name window to change the Instrument type and bring up an additional window. Here you can filter by ACB, FM, Sample, or User to make finding that exact instrument much easier than scrolling on the screen of the 6S.

04 >

On the Instrument page, it's possible to further fine-tune your sounds, as you have control over Tune, Decay, Instrument Effect Settings and effect send controls. It's also possible here to adjust fader colour, mute groups, and LFO settings.

05 >

The EFX tab has full control over the built-in Reverb and Delay options. Opening up the Tape Echo setting, for example, really shows just how much customisation is possible under the hood of the TR-6S, as there are 11 options to tweak!

06

In order to send the changes you've made in the editor to the TR-6S, press the Send button. It's also possible to write your kit to a location on your computer's hard drive for recall at a later date. Overall, this TR Editor adds a lot of deep control for a machine with a very small footprint and is going to make a lot of beatmakers very happy. FM

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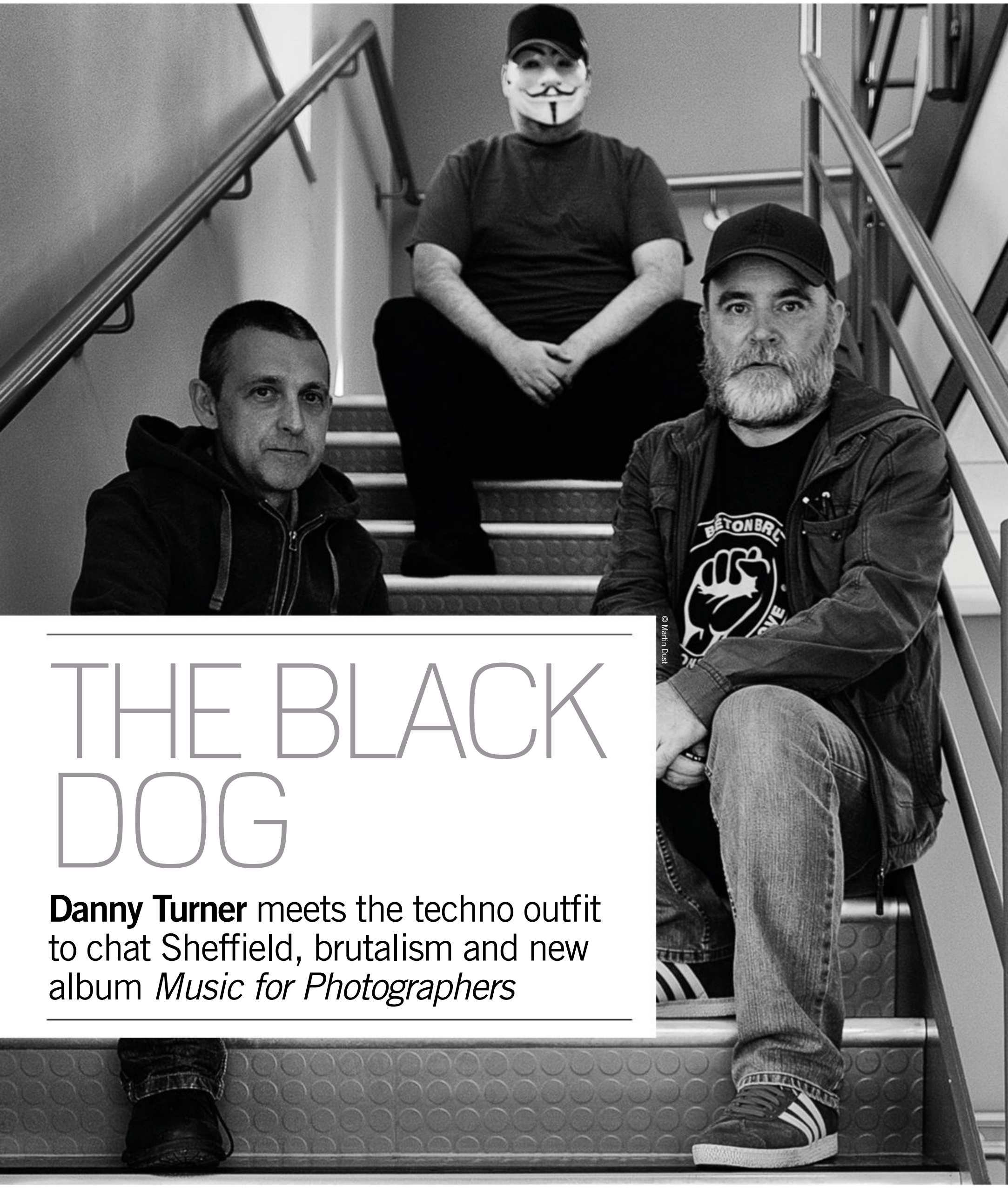


© Martin Dust

THE BLACK DOG

Danny Turner meets the techno outfit to chat Sheffield, brutalism and new album *Music for Photographers*

Sheffield's best-known purveyors of 'listening techno', The Black Dog hypnotised the electronic world with seminal '90s albums such as *Bytes* and *Spanners*. With the line-up changing from its initial formation, the last two decades have seen founding member Ken Downie joining forces with Martin and Richard Dust, with the trio treating us to a raft of unnervingly esoteric albums since the release of *Silenced* in 2005.

Away from the music, over the last few years Martin Dust has leaned in on his history in graphic design and reached for his camera to photograph various aesthetically pleasing concrete structures in Sheffield. Initially set to a series of gritty, atmospheric EPs titled *Dubs* and accompanying booklet *Brutal Sheffield*, the project was so successful that The Black Dog went one step further to create the more nuanced instrumental album, *Music For Photographers*.

To what extent did Sheffield's music scene play into your psyche as budding musicians?

Martin Dust: "I'm different to Richard because I'm from the Cabaret Voltaire/Human League era, which had a massive influence on me. When I saw them live I didn't understand how they were making the noises they were and where it came from. The other part, which sounds trivial but meant a lot as a kid, is that I remember buying two sets of tickets – one for U.K. Subs and another for Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, with Joy Division supporting. I also remember coming out of the nightclub and seeing Cabaret Voltaire queuing for a bus *[laughs]*."

Richard Dust: "I arrived just as the whole electronic dance music movement was beginning to drop into the mainstream. Warp Records was starting to show up, clubs were gravitating towards that sound and the rave scene was on the verge of kicking off."

MD: "Just admit it, you liked Pet Shop Boys?"

RD: "Actually, their B-sides had a lot of obscure remixes from people you'd never heard of at the time. There was a local scene and I also remember Manchester being a big influence, but we were always aware of what was going on Sheffield."

Synthpop bands like ABC and Heaven 17 also came from Sheffield. Is that electro-pop sound really reflective of the city?

MD: "The Human League's first two albums struggled to make any money or break through and then Gary Numan came along and blew them all out of the water. That was a big wake-up call. Before ABC, the band was called Vice Versa and Martin Fry wasn't the singer. He had the blonde hair but used to wear a big mohair jumper and played a single oscillator like Stockhausen. In Sheffield, we seem to have a ten-year rule where somebody makes it and a few others escape, but these days every deal you're forced to sign is a full 360 and we know what our Spotify royalty cheques look like."

Didn't Gary Numan say he only got £37 from a million Spotify streams?

MD: "It roughly works out at £1,000 for a million plays, which is appalling. We're hoping that somebody somewhere is inventing a better system, something involving Blockchain or NFTs, even though Spotify is Blockchain technology – you just can't see it. I don't know what the future is on that side, but there's no future in having a million plays."

RD: "The big companies have really got a stranglehold on things and Spotify is a good example in that the big labels pretend to represent their artists but are also negotiating shareholdings so they can cream money from the top. Somewhere down the chain their artists might get a cut, but independents are right at the bottom of the feeding chain and don't get a look in."

Martin, how has your experience of photographing around Sheffield fed into the latest Black Dog album *Music for Photographers*?

MD: "Basically, Sheffield's punctuated by a large social housing estate called Park Hill and on the left-hand side the entertainment centre/car park has two of the largest brutalist buildings in the city. When modernism started to replace the Victorian slums, brutalism looked like the future because you couldn't build those structures with bricks. It sounds really nerdy but there are some fantastic lines on brutalist buildings, which you wouldn't say about modernist ones. People don't like brutalism because they don't understand it or they've not been pitched it properly, but there's a beauty in grey."

Richard, were you as involved on the photography side throughout this project?

RD: "Not so much because that's Martin's passion. He goes out and looks for what he wants and takes pictures, but that's being fed back to us all the time. Some of that process he's not entirely happy with, which is when Ken and I use it as a starting point for parts, ideas and setting the tone for the type of music we want to make."

MD: "It's been a weird process. For example, I've been to one church 20 times trying to get a picture of it without a fucking car in front of it – even at four o'clock in the morning. The point of us writing the music was to get me to slow down and spend more time on-site trying to find those creative lines."

Earlier this year, you released the *Dubs* EPs. Is that where the idea for the book *Brutal Sheffield* originated?

MD: "We started by creating the *Dubs* EPs, which was 100 hand-stamped 12"s with a booklet, prints and a badge. We wanted to create a piece of art, so all the titles and tracks were about different areas of Sheffield. Then people started commenting more and more on the architecture and the stories, so we thought about making a book. *Brutal Sheffield* was such a runaway success that none of us could believe it and we started wondering if we should make books instead of music. Now we're going to do a second book called *Brutal Yorkshire* to test the theory of whether the first book was just a fluke."

RD: "Initially, the music on the *Dubs* EPs was about locations rather than photography, but as Martin started taking more and more photos, a conversation came up about making companion pieces or undertaking a project that would aid the photographic process. So *Music for Photographers* started developing over time as we were finishing the EPs."

How has the recording process been different to how you'd normally work on an album?

MD: "We started doing recordings at these photographic locations and putting things together that way. We made Foley recordings and used Zooms for recording environmental stuff by putting them on objects so that they'd amplify people walking up steps, etc. We've not gone full Chris Watson yet with all the special microphone setups, but that might be coming. Because of the wind and the architecture of the buildings, a place like Park Hill, for

example, cycles at around 60Hz and there's a natural hum to it. We started using that, and then we created the rule of not using any human voices – nothing that would pull you out of the music. Then we'd use the MacBook Pro to bring stuff in, because sometimes I'd be waiting three or four hours for the weather to change before I could take more photos."

Did any aspects of that process derail you?

MD: "I'd written 18 extra tracks and sent them to Rich and Ken, but when I had a listen back they were absolutely miserable. You could've called that album 'Music to Commit Suicide To', but I associate that with the way the whole process was leaking through, from getting frustrated with having to keep going back to various locations to the weather being shit or being threatened with arrest for taking photos, twice."

You had problems taking the photos?

MD: "As a photographer I find there's two kinds of conversation you get into and the first one is 'what are you taking a picture of that for?' That's usually a friendly conversation because they're enquiring and I'd tell them that I'm looking at social housing and brutalist architecture in its setting and the beauty of everyday objects, but one guy threatened to knock my block off because he was upset that I was taking a picture of his home. I think he'd been drinking."

Is that when the police got involved?

MD: "No, that was in Doncaster where they've got a fantastic brutalist court and police station. It's a really run down precinct with a great car park, but the police immediately came out to me and lied, saying I needed permission to be there and had to book it in."

Is it tricky to get the intention of the music right when three of you are working on the music in tandem?

MD: "I don't think so, as we always have set rules for our music projects. We've got loads of folders containing pieces of music we wrote for *Music for Photographers* that didn't conform, but we tend to use mood boards, pictures and video and have shared access to all that information. When you have three creative people working on music it can get derailed quickly by the person who's got the most time, but there's not many arguments. Ken and I tend to make really noisy, dirty stuff that Rich cleans up and then we tell him to put it all back. Overall though, it works for us, as we all come from a creative background."

"I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO CREATE THE PERFECT ALBUM"

© Martin Dust

Despite working collectively, will you tend to compartmentalise certain skills?

RD: "There's a bit of a mish mash of stuff going on, especially at first when we're creating lots of ideas using little loops and samples. All of that stuff goes into the Google cloud and we all dip into that and have the freedom to mix and match whatever we want. Half of the time a lot of it never gets used, but something I throw away Martin might pick up, find interesting and start working on. It's a very backwards/forwards approach, and only when we have full tracks do I start thinking about taking the track away from a rough demo and start to clean and shape it."

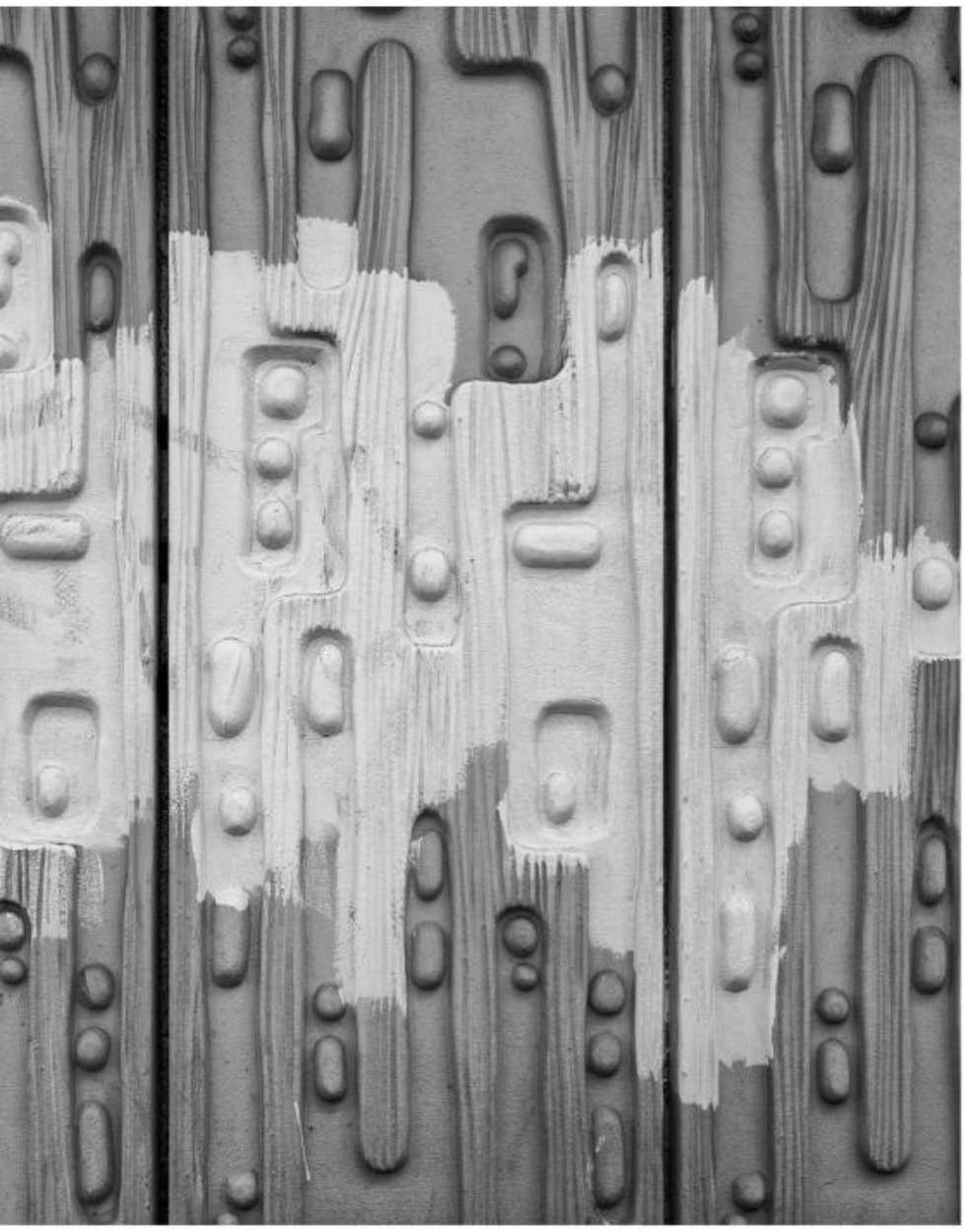
MD: "When that's done, Ken and I tend to work on the running order and I still do that old thing of burning stuff to CD and having a drive or a walk to listen to the album as a continuous piece of music. I've always wanted to create the perfect album. It's what I strive for, but you've got to be drop dead lucky – like The Human League's *Dare*, there's not a shit track on it; it just works."

RD: "I don't think anybody ever delivers an album and actually thinks they've achieved that. With everything you do, you're always left thinking there's something missing or it's not quite right."

MD: "And you don't get to decide, which is weird. I don't want it to happen either, because if you make the perfect album what do you do then? It may be old-fashioned, but I still believe in an album being an experience and love creating objects."

Is it important for you to all use the same music-making tools to achieve a consistent sound palette?

MD: "We're all working in Ableton and the stock plugins like Simpler and Sampler are really straightforward. We also work with a lot of audio files, so we're continually flattening and rendering



© Martin Dust

stuff out, whether they're stems, loops of an entire idea or some kind of sound bed or texture we've been working on. So we're throwing these audio files backwards and forwards all the time, which plays into how you generally use Ableton really well."

RD: "We use a lot of the same outboard stuff and software like Massive X, Omnisphere, Helm, and Max for Live, and because we've got all the accompanying text and photos we can identify and define what music should go into what folder."

You guys come from a hardware era but seem to have fully adapted to using software?

RD: "What's attractive is having the simple ability to be able to save all your ideas, recall them later or just send them to someone else. Obviously, we couldn't do that with a hardware setup, but we'd still have to record it and end up transferring the audio files anyway."

MD: "We had all the OB8s and Roland stuff, but we just sampled the hell out of them and created our own libraries, so why have thirty grand's worth of stuff that we bought off Phil Collins sat in the corner? We'd plug it in and smell the dust burning, so we found it better to invest in small plugin companies and do it that way. Whether it's pissing it down or sunny, I can fire the MacBook Pro up, get my small Akai keyboard out and write music in the back of a car. That's something we learned from our album *Music For Airports*, which was almost exclusively written while sat waiting in airports, destroying Brian Eno's dream of a false utopia."

Has the pandemic interfered with your operations?

RD: "This is only the eighth time I've been in the same room with Rich in two years. It's weird how we've not talked about this project much in person yet still been able to get things done, although on reflection I guess we've been doing that for 21 years. Otherwise, we've been waiting nine months for the vinyl, which has been weird because we usually finish the album on a real buzz and three months later everything's out. This time, as we've had to wait such a long time, it's arrested our creative process and meant we can't leave this project to go on to the next one. God bless Record Store Day – everyone needs a Radiohead and Muppets album in green vinyl."

You seem to have been completely inspired by combining audio with visual arts. What comes next?

MD: "The photography's opened up another world. People have asked us to do exhibitions, which really played to our ego until we realised we'd have to pay two and a half grand just to kit everything out and put it on a wall. We've also started creating a live audio-visual version of the album with Amoeba Design taking our photographs and manipulating them alongside a three-screen live show that we performed recently at the No Bounds Festival. They're also working on pitching a full, wraparound 360 degree version, which is all really interesting and new because it takes us into different environments and we get to meet different people." FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Black Dog's new album *Music for Photographers* is out now on Dust Science. For more information, visit **duststoredigital.com/album/music-for-photographers**

Glitch

’90s experimentalism meets digital tech to create the surprisingly influential glitch aesthetic

Some genres are more influential than their mainstream appeal may suggest. Glitch almost certainly falls into that category, alongside previously featured musical movements such as musique concrète and Oramics.

The roots of the glitch aesthetic are largely defined by digital technology, which sounds inherently different to faulty analogue gear when it malfunctions. Think of faulty or abused analogue gear and the range of tones is quite familiar: amp distortion, tape saturation, analogue overdrive and so on. By contrast, digital glitches are generally harsher and less predictable, as anyone who’s played a corrupted MP3 or a scratched CD will know.

Incorporating digital malfunctions into a musical context feels, in retrospect, like a logical progression of sound art, musique concrète, industrial music and noise techniques. Japanese artist Yasunao Tone was among the first to experiment with what we might now recognise as post-digital glitch techniques, experimenting with manipulating CD playback soon after the format was introduced in the early 1980s. His 1997 album *Solo for Wounded CD* is a two-part composition created entirely from sounds of scratched CDs.

Video game soundtracks and chiptune music also had a major influence on glitch. There are obvious parallels in terms of digital synthesis and sound manipulation, but also direct links in terms of production techniques. Notably, Yuzo Koshiro and Motohiro Kawashima’s soundtrack for Sega’s 1994 beat ’em up *Streets of Rage 3* employed what Koshiro described as an automated music composition system in order to create “fast-beat techno-like jungle”. The glitchy results were disliked by some fans of Koshiro’s previous work, but proved to be a slow-burning touchstone of glitch production.

Autechre’s *Glitch*, from the duo’s 1994 Warp album *Amber*, is often cited as one of the first uses of the term in an electronic music context, though the track itself isn’t particularly glitchy – certainly not by comparison to what the style soon became. ELpH vs Coil’s 1995 album *Worship The Glitch* is probably a better reference point for the manner in which glitchy sounds cross-pollinated with ambient and experimental production techniques.

Things were aided by software like SuperCollider, Pure Data and Max/MSP, which allowed audio to be processed in glitchy fashion. Advances in DAWs also made it easier to sequence precise, detailed patterns of repetitive, glitchy micro-sounds. By the new millennium, more electronic artists were experimenting with glitch techniques to the point that it could be considered a genre in itself. The best startpoint could be the *Clicks & Cuts* compilation series launched by German label Mille Plateaux in 2000. The series documents the surprisingly diverse sounds that fall under that broad umbrella of glitch-adjacent sounds: from the first album alone, compare the crystalline abstraction of Alva Noto’s *Prototype N*, the metallic clank of Kid 606’s *Sonqizzmaster*, the ambient shuffle of Frank Bretschneider’s *Kern*...

There’s an argument that glitch’s biggest mainstream impact wasn’t as a defined genre in itself, but as an aesthetic in other genres, such as glitch hop, which combines glitchy noises with hip-hop-influenced beats. In fact, the long-term influence of glitch may not yet have peaked. In recent years, new generations are embracing glitch, from hyperpop producers such as AG Cook embracing weird and wonderful glitch-inspired sounds in pop hits for the likes of Charli XCX, through to the TikTok glitchcore aesthetic, in which pointedly retro video edits are mashed together with hyperpop-inspired emo rap. The influence of glitch lives on.

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The past, present and future of glitch

PAST: Yuzo Koshiro and Motohiro Kawashima – *Streets of Rage 3* OST

Critically unacclaimed on release in 1994, the *Streets of Rage 3* music didn't immediately become a cult classic like so many other Sega soundtracks. In retrospect, it's a more challenging listen than the eclectic hip-hop and techno-inspired soundtracks of previous games in the beat 'em up series, but it's an obvious precursor to glitch aesthetics in electronic music. You can hear it all on YouTube if you don't fancy tracking down an original console version.

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PRESENT: Hyperpop

'90s glitch purists might sneer, but some of the most fascinating glitch in recent years has been concealed within the Trojan horse of pop production, spearheaded by AG Cook's PC Music collective. Cook's curated Hyperpop playlist on Spotify is as good a starting point as any, but Charli XCX's *How I'm Feeling Now* (2020) and the late SOPHIE's *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides* (2018) prove that the sound also works just as well in a full-length album format.

FUTURE: Glitchcore

Boomers, look away now. The frighteningly Gen Z world of TikTok may be a step too far for older listeners, but it almost certainly represents the future of glitch. Search for #glitchcore videos and you'll find thousands of knowingly self-aware #eyestrain edits mashing together glitchy aesthetics with glitchy music from the broad spectrum of hyperpop and SoundCloud rap. Bewildering and terrifying to anyone over the age of 24? Probably.

VITALIC

The French producer celebrates his 20th year in the game with a new post punk-tinged album. **Matt Mullen** learns more about his latest projects

© Yann Rabanier

French producer and multi-instrumentalist Vitalic recently celebrated his 20th year in electronic music, and with that, his first album release since 2017. The new record, *Dissidænce*, is a two-part affair, and the first volume promises more of the mutant techno with which he made his name. This time around, though, the producer is imbuing his 4/4 constructions with a post-punk edge. Vitalic joined us to talk through studio essentials and how the new release represents a return to his queer roots and sonic identity.

Tell us about how you first got involved with production.
"Since I was a kid I'd listen to electronic music, and I had the fantasy that one day I could get synths and write some music myself. At that time, machines were expensive and it seemed almost impossible to achieve that from my small town. I finally bought my first synth without knowing how to use it or where it would lead me in 1995, with money from a summer job. From then on I built up a studio little by little."

What's your current studio looking like?
"My studio is a room painted in black under my flat in Paris. It's made up with a large screen, and some analogue and digital synths. It's not too big but I feel very comfortable when I'm there."

"I HAD THE FEELING I WANTED TO SET DISCO ASIDE FOR A WHILE"

What DAW are you using?
"I use Ableton. I tried other solutions but it's my favourite so far. I use Ableton Live both for the music and the stage lights – it is the brain of everything."

What one piece of gear that's in your studio could you not do without?
"At the moment my favourite piece of equipment is the DSI Pro 3; it sounds both tight and warm. I used it a lot on the new LP."

Tell us about the new album track, *Carbonized*. What were the inspirations behind this one?
"The track is about a toxic girl who destroys anything she touches, ie, anybody she meets. We all know someone like that. The music is a mix between techno and post-punk songs, a kind of electro-punk."

The press release surrounding the record states that the album sees you going back to your "queer roots and sonic identity" – could you elaborate on that at all?
"I think it refers to the fact I am getting back to punk stuff. I experimented a lot of things through the years, including ravey techno and disco. After I did Kompromat with Rebeka Warrior two years ago, which was post-punk, I had the feeling I wanted to set disco aside for some time, and get back to darker and harsher music with a techno twist."

How do you feel *Carbonized* differs from your previous work? Are you trying something new here or building on what you've done before?
"*Carbonized* reminds me of *My Friend Dario* – that was on my first LP. Nevertheless I took another direction. I love bands like Crash Course in Science or Daniel Miller, who were very experimental in their time. The basic concept of the album is to make a bridge between contemporary techno and post-punk."

Were there one or two pieces of studio equipment that were essential to the making of this record?
"Together with the Pro 3, I used my GRP A4, which is an Italian synthesiser that sounds very lush and its sequencer is a lot of fun. I also used the Moog One for melodic leads and large pads. Usually I don't use too many machines for each LP, in order to have some sonic colour on the record."

What's your favourite track off the new record, and why?
"I think that my favourite song on *Dissidænce Episode 1* is *Danse avec Moi*. I like the crusty-mellow bass from the Pro 3, that makes it sound almost alive. Also I like the lyrics in French, talking about falling in love on the dance floor. Finally, the effect on the voice is very kinky."

Do you have plans to tour this album? Tell us about your live setup…
"I will start the tour in January, and I'm hoping that it won't be postponed. I don't know yet which machine I will be using. I like the Novation Peak which I used a lot on my previous tour because it can make anything, from basses to lead sounds. Maybe I'll try the Hydrasynth from ASM. I should also take the pieces of equipment I've designed myself with Tom, a German engineer, like the KOCMOC, which is the brain of the live setup."

Did you collaborate with anyone on this record?
"Yes, I wrote a song with Kiddy Smile, *Rave Against the System*. But I did no other collabs for this LP. Basically, I did everything myself and I won't do remixes."

There's a real range of styles present on your latest album. Do you see yourself as an artist working in any particular genre, or do you not pay attention to these kinds of categories?
"I wouldn't say there is a large range of styles… but there is a large range of moods instead. I cannot make an LP with 12 or 15 similar songs. It takes a year to make an album and I go through different feelings, and you can find that in the music."

What have you been listening to over the past year?
"Over the past years I have been rediscovering '90s techno and acid. Bending genders, with a lot of fun and creativity. People like Bicep and Burial push the boundaries." FM

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Dissidænce Episode 1 is out now. To learn more, visit **vitalic.org**

18+

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Waldorf M £1,649

Bruce Aisher checks out Waldorf's newly unveiled hybrid synth to see if it can conjure up some of that classic wavetable magic

CONTACT **WHO:** Waldorf **WEB:** waldorfmusic.com **KEY FEATURES** 2 independent wavetables per voice, 96 Factory Wave-ables + 32 slots for User Wavetables, Analogue low-pass 24 dB/Oct filter with saturation, Analogue stereo VCA for each voice, 4 Envelope Generators (two loop-able) and 2 LFOs. Arpeggiator, 8-voice polyphony (16 voices with expansion board), 4-part multitimbral (4 parts can be assigned to 4 individual stereo outputs)

THE PROS & CONS

+

Two wavetable playback modes – Classic and Modern

Great-sounding analogue filters

Compatible with Microwave I SysEx band and sound transfer

–

Patch management could be better

Limited range of user wavetable import options compared to software

No built-in (analogue or digital) effects

Germany's Waldorf have been around since the late 1980s, rising out of the ashes of Wolfgang Palm's famed synth company PPG. PPG and Palm found success with their various 'Wave' synths which used the newly commercialised technique of wavetable synthesis. You'll find more on the history and development of the wavetable concept in the box over the page, but the key concept behind this method of synthesis lies in the way in which the oscillators generate their sounds. Rather than having a conventional analogue oscillator with a range of basic waveform shapes (square, sawtooth etc), wavetable synthesisers use digital memory to store more complex single-cycle wave shapes that can then be filtered and modulated as usual. However, the way these complex forms are stored allows you to move between adjacent waveforms easily.

Sets of these waveforms are stored in a so-called 'wavetable', with the ability to adjust from where in the table these waveforms are accessed. Moving through the table results in progressive timbral changes – though it's up to the user as to how this aspect is employed or controlled.

Wave of nostalgia

It's this concept that sits at the core of Waldorf's new M desktop synthesiser, and like PPG and earlier Waldorf systems, combines this with analogue amplifier and filter stages. This makes it a hybrid system (unlike later Waldorf synths such as the Blofeld and all plugins, which employ analogue modelling/DSP for the entirety of the virtual sound generation architecture).

Many aspects of M hark back to the first Waldorf Microwave – a popular rack-mounted synth introduced in 1989. Unlike the original Microwave, the M comes in desktop format with a knob-laden front panel and colour display. The unit itself is built into a very sturdy metal chassis, with clearly-labelled connectors along the rear. Here you'll find the main stereo outputs – whose output is mirrored on the headphone output (with a level adjustable via a small rear-facing pot), and a set of four auxiliary stereo outputs (using TRS jacks). Control connectivity is handled via standard MIDI ports and USB 2.0. You'll also find an SD card socket; this card can be used for storing user wavetables and patches and facilitating firmware updates. The latter is a relatively straightforward procedure that involves copying two files to an SD card and following the relevant update instructions – a task I completed before taking a closer look at the synth.

Architecturally sound

Before getting into lower-level detail, it is worth discussing the general approach taken by Waldorf to accessing and editing parameters on the M. Most of the front panel controls relate to specific function (or sets of features), and any changes are indicated on the screen. Above the screen are eight mode buttons for accessing further parameters related to each area of the synth (LFO, Envelope etc), and beneath the screen are four encoders that control the parameters shown at the bottom of each window. A single tap on any of these resets the current parameter to its default value. The screen itself certainly helps navigation, though on some screens the text is quite small, and I wonder if more use might have been made of colour outside of the grey/bluish colour palette.

In terms of architecture, each voice – of which there are eight on the standard model – features two independent wavetable oscillators and a noise generator, which all then feed (via the mixer section) into an analogue filter (VCF) and then amplifier (VCA) sections. Besides the dedicated Filter, Amp and Wave

THE ALTERNATIVES

Modal Argon 8M £499

Modal's Argon is an all-digital, 8-voice desktop wavetable synth with an impressive spec and free desktop editor/librarian app.

modalelectronics.com

Korg Modwave £679

Korg's Modwave is another DSP-only affair and, like the Argon, hosts up to four wavetables per voice. It has built-in effects and some very interesting modulation/sequencing options.

korg.com

Waldorf NW1 £169

Modular fans can create their own hybrid wavetable monosynth by patching Waldorf's NW1 module into an analogue filter and amp stages.

waldorfmusic.com

envelopes there's an additional freely assignable envelope and two LFOs.

The oscillators themselves take pride of place on the left side of the front-panel with their matching red knobs. The controls for each oscillator are similar, with the aforementioned red control for manually moving through the wavetable and a larger concentric control for selecting the wavetable itself. The rest of the controls in this section largely deal with tuning (octave, semitone, detune etc) plus the degree to which each oscillator's wavetable position is modulated by the dedicated Wave Envelope (more on this shortly).

There are 96 factory wavetables that can be employed in each oscillator, but this doesn't quite give the full picture in terms of raw sonics, as each sound program can make use of two different modes. Classic mode reduces playback to 8-bit and with no anti-aliasing, whilst Modern mode has a smoother higher-quality sound. Additionally, this mode allows you to engage the oscillator sync and ring modulation features. Classic mode is therefore much closer in sound to the original Microwave I. Waldorf have even included the option to engage the so-called ASIC Mixing Bug from this synth, which introduced distortion if oscillator levels were set too high (and which was employed as a known sound-design trick for creating harsh sounds). Ex-users who might be feeling a tiny bit misty-eyed about their old Microwave I can even load original soundbanks via SysEx. Unfortunately, I couldn't test mine against the M as it's undergoing repair. A sign that I should upgrade and move on perhaps?

Getting creative

Those feeling more adventurous can load user-created wavetables, and there are 32 slots available for this purpose. Waldorf don't provide any software for creating wavetables, and the manual is not exactly verbose on this front, but the unit expects user wavetable files to be in 8-bit sample format and to contain up to 256 waves. I managed to download a few and – after the relatively slow import process – managed to use them in a

> Ex-users feeling misty-eyed can even load original soundbanks via SysEx

THE JOURNEY TO WAVETABLE SYNTHESIS

We now live in a world where so many types of synthesis can be found in both hardware and software form, that it's easy to forget there was a time when a commercial product introducing a novel way of making sound (and therefore expanding the available synthetic sound palette) was a big deal.

Wavetable synthesis was such a thing, and relied on the integration of digital audio playback into the established analogue synth design framework. Most analogue synths had limited waveform options, so the next logical step was to find a way of expanding these. Full sample playback was in its infancy; very limited and very expensive. However, storing single-cycle waveforms was a realistic proposition. Combine these with conventional analogue filtering and modulation circuits and the tonal options grew hugely.

The leap that PPG made in the early '80s was storing slightly different, evolving waveforms together in a long file (a table) and letting the user move between them manually or under control for an external modulation source like an LFO or Env.

few patches. I even loaded a renamed Word file, with audible, but gnarly-sounding results.

Besides the oscillators, much of a subtractive synth's sound comes from the filter design it employs. The M uses an SSI 2144 resonant 24db/octave for each voice. This is a recent chip based around the circuitry of the classic SSM 2044 found in a host of classic synths (including the PPG Wave 2.2 and 2.3). To get a sense of how it faired, I dialled up an analogue-style brass patch and the results were immediately impressive. Pushing the resonance up delivers a satisfying 'squelch', and ultimately self-oscillation, so a thumbs-up here. Final shaping is done by the (analogue) VCA section, which also deals with the panning of each voice.

All of the various sections that we've mentioned above have their own modulation/control sections where the two LFOs, envelopes and other sources such as velocity and the mod-wheel all play their part. The dedicated filter and amp envelopes are relatively conventional 4-stage ADSRs whereas the Wave Envelope and its freely-assignable partner use a loopable 8-stage level-time system. Needless to say, there are more than enough options here for most normal eventualities you'd encounter.

In terms of performance, the M also features a flexible arpeggiator and multi mode (where four parts can be played simultaneously) to create more complex layers or for independent control across different MIDI channels and outputs.

Salad days

Despite plentiful controls, detailed programming does require menu diving, though it is relatively straightforward and there are a huge number of presets to get you started. Patch management and loading could be aided with better use of the screen and the ability to categorise sounds – possibly something that an update could fix.

Waldorf have done a great job of revisiting the true analogue-digital hybrid technology that began with PPG and that they subsequently put into the original Microwave. There is certainly something special about the way in which the oscillators interact and subtle distortions and imperfections creep in as the sound makes its way through the analogue amps and filters. Ardent (and wealthy) PPG purists will likely stick with their very expensive original units, but for the rest of us the M ticks most of the 'classic hybrid wavetable' boxes. It's worth noting however that the second-hand price of Waldorf Microwave I is currently quite a bit lower than for a new M and that there are some areas where Waldorf might have considered a more forward-thinking approach. For example, the M has no built-in effects processing, and while it might not be the right place to add a cheap and cheerful reverb they might have been more adventurous and added a vintage-style analogue chorus or digital delay as a way of increasing its sonic reach (whilst still doffing their hat to 'authenticity').

The Waldorf M is not cheap, and there is some stiff competition from all-digital wavetable synths from companies like Korg, Modal and software-based alternatives. However, for those out there who want the ultimate modern, yet authentically realised, take on this classic approach to synthesis, the M could well fit the bill perfectly. FM

BIG RED KNOB: A large red wave selection control has been a feature of many Waldorf synths since the original Microwave's release in 1989

AUX OUTPUTS: Four separate patches can be independently controlled and routed to their own set of stereo outputs

ANALOGUE VCF: Each voice employs an analogue filter for shaping the output of the digital oscillator section

SCREEN: The colour screen provides visual feedback of the main controls and access to the extended functions and modulation options

FM VERDICT

8.9

Sounds great and captures the full range of classic hybrid wavetable sounds (from smooth via glassy to downright gnarly)

Akai MPC Studio £230

Akai's revamped MPC Studio combines hardware control with software power to deliver everything needed to run an MPC-based setup, says **Martin Delaney**

CONTACT **WHO:** Akai Pro **WEB:** akaipro.com **KEY FEATURES** **SOFTWARE INTEGRATION:** This is a dedicated hardware front-end for Akai's MPC 2 DAW. **HARDWARE INTERFACE:** Akai are old hands at interface design, and that shows here, with a clean layout, and the classic MPC pads we've all poked Pad modes - sequence, or play notes and chords, from the pads

THE PROS & CONS

+

The trademark pads are always fun to play, and with a controller it's even more rewarding

MPC software has matured to become an effective DAW in its own right

Good price for a bundle that includes the controller and full MPC software

–

The hybrid hardware/software approach isn't for everybody

Akai's MPC Studio joins the MPC range, which comprises the MPC One, MPC Live, and MPC X. The Studio is a USB MIDI device that connects to a computer and controls the included MPC 2 DAW software – the other MPCs can also do this, but also function as fully standalone sequencing/sampling devices. Consequently the Studio is more compact and more affordable than its siblings, giving potential users a choice that reflects their budgets and preferred working habits. It replaces a previous MPC Studio model, now discontinued, which had a more square-shaped layout, so don't get the two mixed up – this one is technically the MPC Studio II.

The box includes the Studio, a USB cable, and two 3.5mm-DIN MIDI cable adaptors. The top panel bears the 16 familiar MPC pads, sturdy rubberised pieces with coloured LED rings around each one, a vertical control strip, an array of buttons, a small LCD display, and a larger data dial. At the back you'll find a USB port (purposely designed to be harder to disconnect for mid-gig safety), and 3.5mm MIDI in and out. It's powered by USB, so there's no need for a mains adapter. Once the device is registered, a variety of downloads are available, most important being the MPC 2 software.

It's obvious that the MPCs are no longer simple beat machines – the MPC Software is a fully-blown DAW, with audio and MIDI recording, sample-based instruments aka keygroups, time stretching, and Ableton Link. Plugin instruments, including Hype, Bassline, Electric, Hybrid, Tube Synth, Solina, Mellotron, and WayOutWare Odyssey, reach beyond what you might expect for a machine that still has the aura of hip-hop around it. Having used the Akai Force and MPC Live, we're quite familiar with these instruments, and can vouch for their usability. Audio effects include offerings from Akai and AIR, including reverbs, delays, filters, EQs, compressors, and so on. The latest version of MPC 2 includes FX Racks – where up to four effects can be saved and recalled together – and vocally-oriented AIR FX including Vocal Doubler, Vocal Harmonizer, and Vocal Tuner. MPC 2 will host AU and VST plugins, although this can be turned on its head, as MPC 2 will itself function as a plugin inside other DAWs, creating fascinating possibilities for complex setups. A DAW within a DAW, who wouldn't want to try that? (See also Reason 11). The Studio hardware still works when MPC is acting as a plugin, by the way.

In pure hardware terms, the MPC Studio makes a fine controller, at a sensible size. It's compact and spacious enough to swing those pad-hittin' fingers. Let's begin by observing that there's something strangely satisfying about hardware transport controls. And the pads? Sure, they're proper MPC pads. Playing beats on them is fine as-is, and they're pressure and velocity sensitive, though you might need some adjustment for playing more delicate instrument parts – there are options for setting pad sensitivity which will deal with this. With the right tweaks for personal style, these will handle anything from finger drumming to piano performances. There are no knobs to tweak, but the assignable touch strip comes into

THE ALTERNATIVES

Akai MPC One
£585

As mentioned elsewhere, the MPC Studio's prime competitors might be other Akai hardware, for example the MPC One sequencer/sampler, which adds a 7" diagonal touch display. It'll integrate with the MPC software on a connected computer, but it's also a standalone, fully functioning machine in its own right.

akaipro.com

NI Maschine Mikro £200

The Akai MPCs and the Native Instrument Maschines are clearly lined up against each other. Both ranges are capable of producing any variety of sound, but both skew towards beatmaking. The Maschine Mikro is a hardware controller, coming in a bundle that includes the full Native Instruments Maschine software.

native-instruments.com

DISPLAY: The teeny LCD is the smallest on any MPC product. It definitely saves real estate, but it is full-colour, still able to provide visual feedback, and cuts down on mouse or trackpad time

PADS: It wouldn't be an MPC if it didn't have pads, and these examples seem to be the same as the pads on the MPC One or Live; a good thing. Colours change according to function or velocity

TOUCH STRIP: Assignable to any MPC Studio knob, or any of the many software parameters, whether for simple pitchbend/expression, or as just an example – to control an LFO rate

play, with a vertical bar next to it, similar to Apple's (now abandoned) MacBook Pro Touch Bar, showing symbols relevant to the current parameter. The RGB LCD display is *very* small, but it's crisp, the text is legible and the colours help convey the necessary info. This obviously isn't a screen you'd spend a lot of time looking at, but it's still useful. The buttons are very good at reducing mouse-time – it's possible to select tracks, browse and load presets, zoom the computer screen, and apply quantisation, amongst other things.

The mode button is the key to accessing many other functions directly from the pads, for example, the step sequencer – hardware sequencers are always fun to use and this is no exception; in fact that was probably the most enjoyable time we spent with the Studio pads. You might also choose to enter Pad Perform mode to play a single sound pitched across all of the pads, or to trigger chords or scales, or even use the pads to enter locators in the project timeline. We couldn't resist trying it with Ableton Live, a DAW that's over-served by MIDI hardware, if anything. We remapped the incoming MIDI note numbers to the 16 pads in Ableton drum racks, but that's easy enough. In this 'dumb' mode, all the MPC buttons send MIDI too – they work for turning effects on/off, or launching clips and scenes.

The MPC Studio won't be much appreciated by standalone die-hards, nor by users who are already irrevocably attached to other DAWs. But if you're interested in using MPC 2 as a DAW, or a plugin, and you want those MPC pads, this is a good way to get it. The MPC Studio doesn't convey the full glory of the MPC experience, but you get some of it, and that's fair at this price; it's a good 'breakout box' for the software. FM

SELF CONTAINED

The MPC 2 software is undeniably a fully functioning DAW. You can use it to capture and edit samples, apply effects, play the included instruments or other plugins, and finally, bash all of that into some kind of arrangement and export the result. We can't help think most users see the MPCs as beat-making devices, and use other DAWs to finish projects. To this end, it's good to see that MPC 2 can also run as a plugin in other DAWs, like Ableton Live. But, if you peak your budget on the MPC Studio, just install the software and get going. No excuses applicable – it can do everything you need.

FM VERDICT

8.0

A low impact way of adding the MPC flavour to your setup. These pads certainly bring something extra to beat production

Pioneer DJ

STATE OF FLOW

XDJ-RX3

ALL-IN-ONE DJ SYSTEM

10.1-inch touch screen
Enjoy a fresh GUI and a host of new features for quick browsing and accurate mixing

Playlist Bank
Rapidly access your four favourite playlists at all times

Touch Preview
Listen to any part of a track by touching its waveform in the browse section

Color On Jog Display
Keep an eye on essential track information or artwork

Release FX
Hit the Performance Pads to instantly change the energy of your mix

Dual compatibility
Play rekordbox-analyzed music from USB drives or connect a laptop for Performance mode (Serato DJ Pro support coming in early 2022)

MachineRoom Prodigy Dual VCO €300

Rob Redman came to check out the authentiticy of this Moog Prodigy reboot, but stayed for the handbuilt charm

CONTACT **WHO:** MachineRoom **WEB:** machineroom.com.ua **KEY FEATURES** Handbuilt through-hole construction, Classic sounds with some modern additions

It's quite rare to find production models of synth equipment that are fully handbuilt, especially ones that are in a Eurorack format. Often supposedly handbuilt modules are still ultimately based on printed circuit boards but the MachineRoom Prodigy Dual VCO is fully handbuilt, using through-hole construction and a quick look round the back shows the care that's gone into these instruments.

Based on the classic Moog Prodigy, this dual VCO retains all of the well-loved hallmarks of the original but with the addition of a couple of modern features. The ICs used are more stable, meaning they remain more accurate over a larger pitch range. There's also cross modulation between the two oscillators, making for some interesting sound design options.

Build

It's a fairly large (at 20hp) module but not overly deep and at just 35mm is suitable for almost all cases, even smaller travel skiffs. The fascia is logically laid out and clearly labelled, with simple white text. Knobs are silver capped black-ridged affairs, easily manipulated in dark studios or on stage – and they feel great. The resistance is just right, so dialling in the setting needed is easy. Likewise, the toggle switches for waveform choice, FM, tracking and octave selection feel good which is important where there are more than two settings.

The nitty gritty

The primary oscillator runs from 8' to 32', with triangle, square and saw waves, while the secondary switches out the square for a pulse wave, with a range of 4' to 16'. The second oscillator can be hard synced to the first and there's a knob for unison.

It would've been nice to have a patchpoint for CV control of this, like there is for the FM which has both patch point and attenuator. With regards to FM, this module doesn't require an external modulation, as you can cross mod between the two VCOs, which have discrete outputs.

The final controls are a glide, with a lovely range to it, a switch for activating FM and one for toggling the second oscillator's pitch tracking.

The tones that this module produces are warm but lively. They retain that classic, much sought-after analogue sound, without getting too fluffy.

You can get some gritty bite with a filter wide open and lovely creaminess when rolling off highs. This is best suited to low-pass or state-variable filters as it can sound a bit too brittle with a high-pass, but maybe that's to be expected of a module like this. Many of us have unwittingly trained our ears and now have certain expectations. This is absolutely subjective however, so if you prefer brighter tones, this will provide them. FM

THE PROS & CONS

+

Offers a broad, articulate tone

Cross modulation

Excellent pitch-tracking

–

Large footprint

FM VERDICT

9.0

A nicely built homage to a classic, with modernities added for today's player and tones that sound fresh, while giving a nod to the past

AUDIO TENT

EPILOGUE

MINILOGUE XD PRESETS

WWW.AUDIOTENT.COM

512 Audio Skylight

£190

Jon Musgrave plugs up this new podcast-focused large capsule condenser from US manufacturer 512 Audio

CONTACT **WHO:** 512 Audio **WEB:** 512audio.com **KEY FEATURES** **CAPSULE:** 34mm gold plated large diaphragm, **POLAR PATTERN:** Cardioid, **FREQUENCY RANGE:** 20Hz - 20kHz, **SENSITIVITY:** -42dB +3dB (0dB =1V/Pa at 1kHz), **AMX SPL:** 144dB, **WEIGHT:** 1.03kg (including cradle and pop filter), **DIMENSIONS:** 202 x 55.5mm

512 Audio is a new venture from Texan gear manufacturers Warm Audio. So far the product line includes two mics, a dynamic (Limelight) and a condenser (Skylight), and it's the latter I have on the bench for review. Skylight is a keenly priced phantom-powered cardioid condenser with a large 34mm gold-plated capsule. The package includes the mic, a C-shaped suspension cradle and a clip-on dual layer pop shield. The mic has its own pouch and it all comes packaged in a foam-lined box that is ideal for storage.

Although the overall design is reasonably low-key, Skylight looks really stylish and has a pretty striking headstock with shiny vertical strips over a two-layer grille. The mic is also reasonably large and pretty heavy (600g), and when you hook up the cradle and pop shield you're looking at just over 1kg, which means you'll need a reliable mic stand.

Skylight highlights

Like many budget mics, Skylight doesn't include any on-body, low-cut or level-cut options, which I always think is a bit of a shame. Nevertheless, the overall spec is good, including maximum SPL at 144dB and reasonable sensitivity at 8 mV/Pa. There's no quoted noise figure, although on listening with high gain there was nothing obviously afoot.

Skylight is designed primarily for speech and vocals, and is suitably tuned with a high end boost from around 5kHz. Even so, the mic does not sound overhyped, and my first impressions are that the sound is pretty warm and smooth.

> The smooth top end is particularly welcome for anything with complex highs

Getting up close

The pop shield has an elastic clip and simply slips over the headstock so is quick and easy to install. It also sits pretty close to the grille (about 15mm). You might think this would render it not very helpful, but it actually works incredibly well, and it removed pretty much all the plosives I threw at it. Factor in the C-shaped cradle, which lets you get right in close to the headstock, and intimate vocal sounds are easily achievable.

That being said, without the pop shield it's a very different story and it's quite easy to get it to pop, even from about a foot away. Skylight does exhibit some proximity effect, but this only becomes obvious when you're quite close, and it's never overbearing. Even so, it's fair to say it does contribute to the rather rich and pleasing sound that you get when right in close.

Despite being designed for vocals, I found Skylight's sound worked pretty well with other instruments. The smooth top end is particularly welcome for anything with complex highs, and although it's not as revealing or open-sounding as my more expensive mics, it's certainly workable for many applications beyond the obvious ones of vocals and speech.

Skylight's target market is podcasters, streamers, gamers and vocalists and in my opinion they've done a good job of getting a sound that suits those users. In the UK you can buy the mic for £190 online and I think this offers good value for a mic that sounds good and really does look the part. FM

FM VERDICT

8.4

Want an affordable large capsule condenser primarily for voice? Skylight definitely fits the bill. It also looks rather fabulous

THE PROS & CONS

+

Sound tailored for speech and vocals

Stylish headstock

Low profile, C-shaped cradle

Very effective clip-on pop shield

Good value

–

Quite heavy

Campfire Audio Honeydew IEM

£249

These in-ears look the part, but how do they sound? **Rob Redman** runs a test

CONTACT **WHO:** Campfire Audio **WEB:** campfireaudio.com **KEY FEATURES** Custom 10mm full range dynamic driver, optimised 3D printed acoustic design, compact comfort, detachable cable

THE PROS & CONS

+

Clear, precise sound

Excellent fitting options

Canvas carry case and cleaning tool

–

Cable is short

Biased towards the low end

Campfire Audio products have often been noted for their aesthetic design, as well as their excellent performance and this follows through with their lower-end Honeydew IEM (in-ear monitors). The Honeydews come in bright, cheerful packaging that is carried through to the design of the IEMs themselves, which feature a very attractive geometric-shaped body, manufactured using 3D printing. Don't worry there though, there are none of the striations you might expect to find. These are beautifully finished, lightweight and do the job very well. These are a sturdy but delicate pair, sitting comfortably for extended listening sessions. They would actually be as much at home for listening to your favourite streaming service as in the studio or on stage.

A sturdy but delicate pair, sitting comfortably for extended listening sessions

IEMs often use custom-molded earpieces for a perfect fit that not only add stability while moving onstage but can enhance the sound too. Being non-custom, the Honeydews may appear to have a weakness but Campfire have produced a package that will give optimum fit for the majority of users. The package contains five pairs of silicone end-pieces that slip onto the stainless steel spouts. These range from the extra small to the extra large, constructed as such that they sit neatly in the ear canal, compressing just enough to hold them in place comfortably, blocking much external sound. The removable cable hooks over the ear. While there is a small velcro wrap to keep things neat in the case, there is no cinch to adapt the cable in use, which is a small detail and, while not a dealbreaker, they'd be a useful addition.

Which brings me to the audio. The response range covers 5Hz to 18k and while they are capable of precision, delicacy and clarity, they do sound somewhat warmer than you might think. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. The added warmth and character given to that bottom end doesn't feel forced or unnatural as it can in other bass-heavy headphones. It is noticeable, but not to the point of distraction. You'll just need to account for the reduced presence of the mid highs and respond accordingly if EQing your output. For many, this will be very welcome and at this price point it's really not an issue. It's common for headphones of all types to push the bass and these do it far less than some other rivals.

At the end of the day, if you're a casual user, wearing these around the house and stints in a home studio, you will probably enjoy the warmth. If you need accuracy of reproduction above all else, you will probably need to have a look elsewhere. That said, if total accuracy is your top priority, it's unlikely that a pair of IEMs at this price is in your shortlist anyway. FM

FM VERDICT

8.0

A very attractive bundle. There's a low-end bias but they're detailed and clear and you can't ignore the quality and fitting options

Minimal Audio Rift

Rift, from plugin newcomers Minimal Audio, is a cutting-edge hybrid distortion that imparts a modern, unapologetically digital distortion character on your audio signal. It's a plugin with comprehensive processing power, that's easy to use at the same time, and it's garnering attention for all the right reasons.

Minimal describe Rift as "the world's first bipolar distortion plugin", and it's true that this concept has been largely unexplored until now.

The general idea is that the plugin splits an incoming waveform into its positive and negative portions, which can then be mixed and modulated in all sorts of fun ways.

Rift gathers 30 distortion algorithms and organises them into five categories, starting with soft clipping and moving to heavier ground with bit-crushing and sample-rate destruction.

Let's take a look...

Play view >

If you like to live life in easy mode, Rift's Play View is the place to start… and it's also the place you start when opening up the plugin. We start surfing the presets to see what Rift can do to our sound. In this view, the two main knobs, placed on the left and the right, process only the parts of the incoming waveform that are positive (left knob) and only the parts of it that are negative (right knob). The two Macro knobs on the bottom are pre-assigned in the presets to give you the best chance to mess with the sound quickly.

The Filter >

Advanced view contains many of the same elements as Play View, with all extra modulation controls on top. Switch the Filter on and choose between Pre or Post filtering. You can get some intense results by driving resonance into your distortion using the Pre filter. The filter features 24 algorithms and four filter types: Basic, Morph, Peaking, and Harmonic. A Cutoff parameter can be assigned to track MIDI input, quantised to notes and scales, or worked into standard frequency cutoff.

Feedback >

The Feedback panel can be toggled on and off, and lets you return a portion of the output signal to the input, for a host of stereo and ping-pong delays, distorted feedback, chorus and flanger-like modulation, resonators, and even frequency/note-tuned feedback. You can set the feedback rate in notes (MIDI input or specific notes), Hz (for comb filtering effects), milliseconds, and BPM-synced note divisions. Further shaping options are found under Amount, Distort, and Spread.

< Modulation

To assign modulation sources to parameters, all you need to do is drag and drop onto your chosen controller and slide up/down to select the modulation range. The LFO has a Randomize slider you can use to introduce organic variations to the modulation. When it completes the cycle it redraws the LFO shape. Try assigning the LFO to the Cutoff on the filter and setting the Randomize slider in the middle. Turn off Sync and push up Rate, and you'll see the different wave shapes being created.

A MENU OF DISTORTION

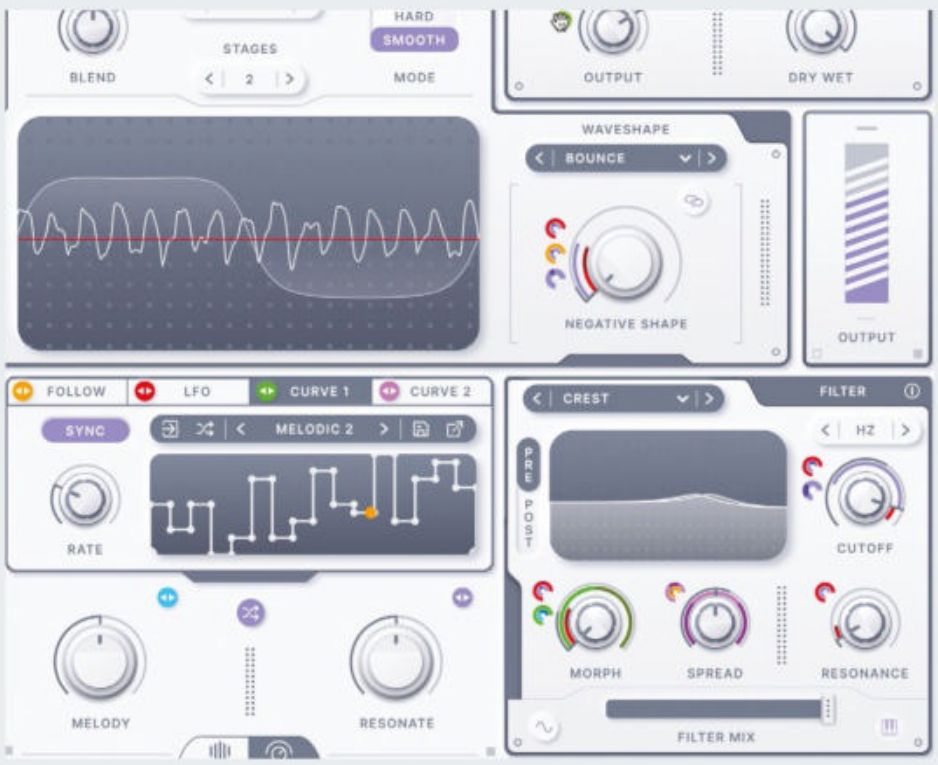
Rift lets you choose from a menu of 30 distortion algorithms for each of the positive and negative waveform halves. They've been neatly categorised; you can opt for waveshaping, wavefolding, noise, bit depth reduction or sample rate reduction. Although 'bipolar distortion' will be new ground for most, it doesn't feel like it when using Rift, as the large display in the middle clearly shows any changes you're making to either side of the waveform. You can add a substantial amount of drive in the top panel (click the 2x multiplier for ultimate decimation) as well as blend between the two different algorithms in two modes: Hard (brighter, more defined) and Smooth (warmer, less defined).

< Curve View

Rift's Curve View is another way of visualising the modulation you apply to the audio signal. In the two Curve modulators, you get more than 50 preset curves that range from simple to complex, plus the ability to tweak to your liking. You can cook up anything from ramps to envelope sequences here, or create random curves. Assign Curve 1 to the Spread on the filter and you'll see the modulation only goes one way – right-click the green icon beside the knob and you can set it in bipolar mode.

Pitch Tracking >

With powerful pitch-tracking capabilities, Rift opens the door for adding pinpointed harmonic content to your sound. The MIDI functionality lets you select either a note or chord and then arranges the output frequency content accordingly. You could add a hint of A minor around the outskirts of your input signal, or a chaotic atonal blend with multiple notes. Live MIDI tracking means you could also run a full melody or chord progression through, and let its various modules clock to your track.



< Layering modulation

When you assign a curve to a parameter, you can choose a depth mod by right-clicking the green icon beside the control. Choose Curve 2 and a purple ring appears in the green one. You can use this to control the modulation that the first curve is applying. If you set the Rate quite slow on Curve 2, you can see that the modulation from Curve 1 is only applied partially when Curve 2 is all the way down. As it comes up, modulation will reduce. To adjust the modulation amount of Curve 1, hold down shift and drag the slider up/down. **FM**

Fluid Audio Axis

€249

It can be a bit of a minefield choosing a budget mic. **Jon Musgrave** weighs up this impressive-looking new entry

CONTACT **WHO:** Fluid Audio **WEB:** fluidaudio.com **KEY FEATURES** **POLAR PATTERN:** Cardioid **CAPSULE:** 34mm gold-sputtered diaphragm, **FREQUENCY RANGE:** 20Hz-20kHz, **SENSITIVITY:** 12.4mV/Pa, **EQUIVALENT NOISE LEVEL:** 16dB A-weighted, **MAX ACOUSTIC SPL:** 136dB, **MAX OUTPUT:** +11 dBu, **DIMENSIONS:** 180 x 50mm, **WEIGHT:** 0.88kg (including cradle and pop shield)

Axis is a new phantom-powered cardioid condenser from US brand Fluid Audio. Fluid are best known for their monitors and they have produced some pretty nice designs over the past 10 years. However, with both monitor headphones and the Axis mic now added to the product line, they're clearly seeking to branch out a bit.

Axis all areas

Axis is built around a 34mm capsule with gold-sputtered diaphragm. With a dark grey cylindrical body and silver grille, the mic looks reasonably traditional, and it feels solid and well made. The bundle includes a silver C-shaped suspension cradle, which matches the grille shading, and a black C-shaped dual-layer clip-on pop shield, though there's no regular mic clip which might have been handy. Rounding things off is a 5m woven coated mic cable from quality manufacturer Scale Technologies. The whole bundle comes in a lockable mini hardshell case.

At under 20cm long, the Axis isn't that big, and even once you fit the suspension cradle the overall profile is still reasonably compact. Nevertheless, that cradle weighs quite a bit and with the pop shield installed makes for quite a heavy combo. The dual-layer pop shield incorporates an elastic mount and to install you simply slide it over the headstock, and once installed it's about 20mm from the grille, which is pretty close.

> Vocals will be a popular source for Axis users and it does a good job here

Axis has reasonable specs, with equivalent noise at 16dB (A-weighted) and sensitivity at 12.4mV/Pa. Fluid suggests that the mic is designed for acoustic instruments, and a quick look at the frequency response reveals a modest lift in the upper mids and a reasonable bit of extra air above 10kHz, both of which can be ideal in this context.

That said, when I first plug up the mic I'm not hearing any substantial boost in the top end and this may be that it's just the air frequencies that are added and the high mids are less hyped. Either way the Axis does sound pretty good. A quick check of the pickup pattern reveals this to be reasonably tight for a cardioid, and, as ever, the off-axis rejection is quite frequency dependent. Nevertheless, my overall impressions are that the mic sounds reasonably neutral.

On top of the pops

I'm quite curious as to how effective the clip-on pop shield will be, and to my surprise it works amazingly well. What's more, the C-shaped design means that it wraps around the headstock, so even if you find yourself off-axis, the capsule's still protected.

I tried the Axis on a number of sources including percussion, drum kit, acoustic guitar and vocals, and it performed pretty well all round.

On acoustic in particular I thought the sound was nicely balanced. Obviously vocals will be a popular source for Axis users and it does a good job here. I particularly liked that the dual-layer pop shield means you can get nice and close without picking up annoying plosives.

All told, this is a very usable microphone, and the overall package with cradle, pop shield, hard case and cable offers excellent value. FM

FM VERDICT

9.2

A well spec'd mic package with a quality finish and plenty of style. A very solid entry into the mic market for Fluid Audio

THE PROS & CONS

+

Reasonably neutral sound with subtle high frequency boost

Compact hard carry case

Accessories include high quality mic cable

Low profile, C-shaped cradle

Very effective dual layer clip-on pop shield

–

No regular mic clip

Roland JD-800

$149 or with Roland Cloud sub

The 1991-released JD-800 combined the benefits of an all-digital system, and the interactivity of a classic programmable polysynth. It included more than 100 audio waveforms and (short) samples, and had an architecture where up to four layers ('tones') could be combined and routed through a decent effects section to create thick, complex patches – in essence allowing you to combine four independent subtractive synth sounds in one.

Unlike other Roland rack modules of the time, the JD-800 largely eschewed 'real' sound samples and focussed on being a true synth. Famed Spectrasonics founder Eric Persing took on sound design duties and the JD ultimately found its way onto many tracks – and its patches still conjure an image of the '90s.

Having owned one, I can attest to its allure, so I was excited when Roland announced that the JD-800 would be resurrected as a Roland Cloud virtual instrument. All the classic patches are here, with an interface similar to the original. This all reminded me what a great sound-designer's synth the JD is. Just insert a better quality reverb across the mix and you have a synth that can still hold its own. ***Bruce Aisher***

roland.com

VERDICT 9.0

Roland – D-50 Dark patch collection

Included with Roland Cloud

Roland spread their energies quite fairly when resurrecting old synths. Given its relative lack of front panel controls, it was therefore a simple matter to make the D-50 available in both plugin and miniaturised hardware form. It's also encouraging that new presets are being created and released via Roland Cloud. The latest is the Dark Patch Collection for the D-50. The 32 patches cover a lot of bases, from bells and guitars to more overtly synth-oriented sounds. The pads work best for me, and combined with a more sophisticated effects chain than the original's, it fits in well in a modern setup. ***Bruce Aisher***

roland.com

VERDICT 7.5

Roland – Synthwave patch collections for JX-3P and TR-707

Included with Roland Cloud

Synthwave is both a retro and contemporary genre at once, and Roland straddles both ends of this. For those who want to find a good source of sounds for making '80s-influenced synth pop, they could do worse than download some of the new sound packs that partner many of Roland's virtual synths. Given that it wasn't always the top-end classic synths that were used on some of your favourite tracks, the JX-3P Synthwave pack includes a nice selection of usable sounds. Partnered with the TR-707 Synthwave pack, and a gated reverb, you'll be rolling up those jacket sleeves in a flash. ***Bruce Aisher***

roland.com

VERDICT 7.2

Loopmasters – Live Jungle Breaks £19.95

Huge crop of breakbeats, played live on a real kit, copying the programming styles of the deadliest '90s jungle producers. Drummer, Ned Haweeli, recreates the kind of dynamite chopped-up loops you used to find on tear-out Dillinja and Photek joints. They add a splash of FX where needed, and modern processing polish over the top, leaving you with a meaty library of killer loops, fills, hits, and software patches.

Tempos are locked in around 160-180bpm, and each masterfully re-fashioned break is captured and engineered to the highest degree of audio fidelity. It makes for a fun resource of blistering beats, for any drum&bass head looking to add extra organic flavour. *Roy Spencer*

loopmasters.com

VERDICT 8.0

Audiotent – Epilogue

Standard: £47
Deluxe: £67

Own a Korg Minilogue XD Hardware Synth? Looking for a preset pack to broaden its already fierce library of dark, moody textures? If you're air-miming a huge "double tick", this release is for you.

You'll find 107 colourful presets, all expertly tweaked, shaped, and oscillated, by a talented team of sound designers.

They've shaped the waves so you can get on with the melodies, summoning synth lines you never knew you had in you.

And if you upgrade to the Deluxe edition, they'll throw in the matching MIDI files and melodic loops to marvel over, too. Be astonished, be inspired. *Roy Spencer*

audiotent.com

VERDICT 8.0

That Sound – Drumline Vol. 2 From $7.99/month

Another super peppy pack of marching band-style drum sounds, to give dynamic punch and drive to your beat programming.

The world renowned outfit, Music City Mystique, have been drafted in, showcasing a multitude of live loops and one-shots, for bolstering your drum library.

Sizzling cymbals, snapping snare thuds and rolls, and plenty of fills to add flavour to the ends of your bars, are on the table. And everything is wide and weighty, capturing the vibe of a room full of military-tight players. Want a piece of that drum corp energy for your pop/hip-hop? This is it. *Roy Spencer*

splice.com

VERDICT 8.0

House Of Loop – Jazz Chill Beats £18.95

Warm, welcoming collection of super fuzzy grooves, with a reassuring lo-fi presence and flaked-out funky feel. Deffo downtempo, and in no hurry to get where they're going. Each laid-back loop and lick has plenty of character and quirk.

From blissed out brass sounds to snappy clicks and claps, all the recordings here are cut from their own cloth, for a mellow, unique collection of beat-making particles.

Rhodes riffs, full and no-kick drum loops, and jazzy guitar melodies round out this set of soothing samples. Perfect for crafters of late night tales and left-of-centre beatscapes. *Roy Spencer*

loopmasters.com

VERDICT 8.0

Sample Magic – Post Disco Boogie From $7.99/month

The super sound of the mid-'70s disco explosion can still be felt, years after the last mirrorball stopped spinning.

Dig through the crates here and you'll be greeted by a marvellous mixed bag of kinky keys, booty bass, and sexy synths. Capturing the styles of that rose-tinted era, with a modern production sheen and shimmer added on top, for good measure.

All the vast and varied music kits, loops, presets, and hits, pop like a champagne cork in the Studio 54 VIP area, and are purpose-built to titillate the types of freaky people that you'd love to find there. "Ooh-ooh", indeed. *Roy Spencer*

splice.com

VERDICT 7.0

Polyend Tracker $649

Martin Delaney fell for the Polyend Tracker sequencer/sampler six months ago – how's he getting on with it now?

CONTACT **WHO:** Polyend **WEB:** polyend.com **KEY FEATURES** The "first hardware tracker in the music world". **DIMENSIONS:** 33 x 282 x 207mm **WEIGHT:** 1.2kg **I/O:** Stereo Out; Mono Line In; Mono Mic In; MIDI In/Out; USB-C

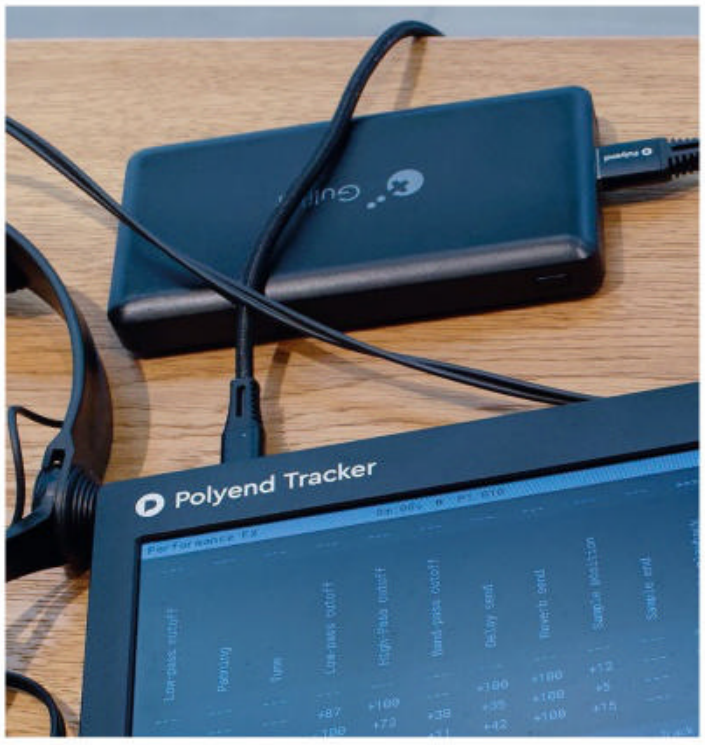
The Polyend Tracker is a machine that implements classic tracker software-style vertical pattern sequencing, alongside sampling, realtime performance features, effects, a built-in radio, and sample capture via audio inputs or from micro-SD memory cards. For the full low-down, read our original review, on musicradar.com. I also wrote about it for *Computer Music*'s 'Is Hardware Killing Software?' story, and I liked it enough that I bought one, which doesn't happen too often. A few months on, the question is, how is it going with the Polyend Tracker?

This was a case of love at first power-up, and since it arrived, the Tracker's been floating around various spots in my studio. I don't have it permanently cabled in, because I'd say at least 75% of my Tracker time is spent with it loose on the table or on my lap – just the Tracker and a pair of headphones. Currently, the Tracker is on firmware version 1.4.0; this most recent update incorporated a horizontal pattern edit mode (mildly controversial), MIDI Out latency compensation, delay and reverb effects on the line input, refinements to performance mode, and new sequencing effects – Arp, Slide, Gate length, and Swing. There was a small hardware refresh at one point – if you've got the rounded buttons, you're on the most recent iteration – and three Artist Editions, with colourful cases representing Bogdan Raczynski, Legowelt and Pete Cannon.

Setting up

My Tracker has had the demo projects and factory content removed from the SD card. I've added a variety of drum kits; some using lo-res sounds from the LSDJ kits, some from vintage drum machines of the 1980s and 1990s, and a few cleaner contemporary sounds, for those just-in-case times.

PORTABLE POLYEND POWER PACK PLAY



I think of the Tracker as an instrument more than a 'production tool' – this is reinforced by the available power options. A power supply's included in the box, but it can run from any USB charger, or a computer's USB port – I often use my iMac (and that cable handles MIDI as well). For full portability, I can power it from the same rechargeable battery device I use for the Nintendo Switch – just add headphones and you're free to roam. I also have a USB power source in my bass guitar rig, so I can use that for live shows.

I have the same collection available on my other hardware sampler, and in Ableton Live on my computer. As well as those, I have some drum loops which can be sliced in the Tracker, and a library of single-cycle waveforms and other tiny samples used for basses, drones, and more melodic parts. I also have a few old Nintendo NES game ROMs in there, because yes, the Tracker can play those games too! Although the Tracker has only eight sequencing tracks, it's important to remember that new samples can be loaded per step in each track – there's no shortage of sounds available.

Getting stuck in

Initially I used the Tracker to program straight beats. Then I moved on to replicating some of my Live projects with beats playing alongside drone tracks, created with the single-cycle waveforms.

Presently I'm exploring randomisation of beats, another thing I do in Live. Because there's an effect that loads a random instrument on any given step, it's easy to get random with a single track – what Tracker lacks in audio effects, it makes up for in sequencing tools. Inevitably, there are features I haven't fully explored, primarily the Performance window and playing live gigs, which like a lot of things, took a backseat because of lockdown's impact on live events. The Tracker has a pleasantly self-contained and retro feel that'd be hard to fake with a MIDI controller and a laptop. As for interaction with other gear, I've recorded it into Ableton Live, synced it to the Akai Force, routed it through a Boss multi-effect unit, and flipped that round to route my instruments and pedals through the Tracker. When using the Tracker standalone, without any other gear attached, sometimes I run it through the OTO Machines BOUM compressor, which makes a substantial difference in fattening and boosting the sound. That's not necessarily period-correct to the Tracker vibe, but it definitely helps with mixing or getting it to kick in a live performance.

Do I still recommend the Tracker, and would I buy it again? Yes. I purged most of my hardware, and don't particularly miss it, but the Tracker is still here! FM

> There's a pleasantly self-contained, retro feel that'd be hard to fake

FM VERDICT

VALUE

BUILD

LONGEVITY

USEFULNESS

OVERALL

9.0

The kind of inspirational, quirky, creative music machine that will keep you coming back for more

THE PROS & CONS

+

Don't worry if you're new to it – the vertical step sequencing works brilliantly, and is surprisingly dynamic and fluid

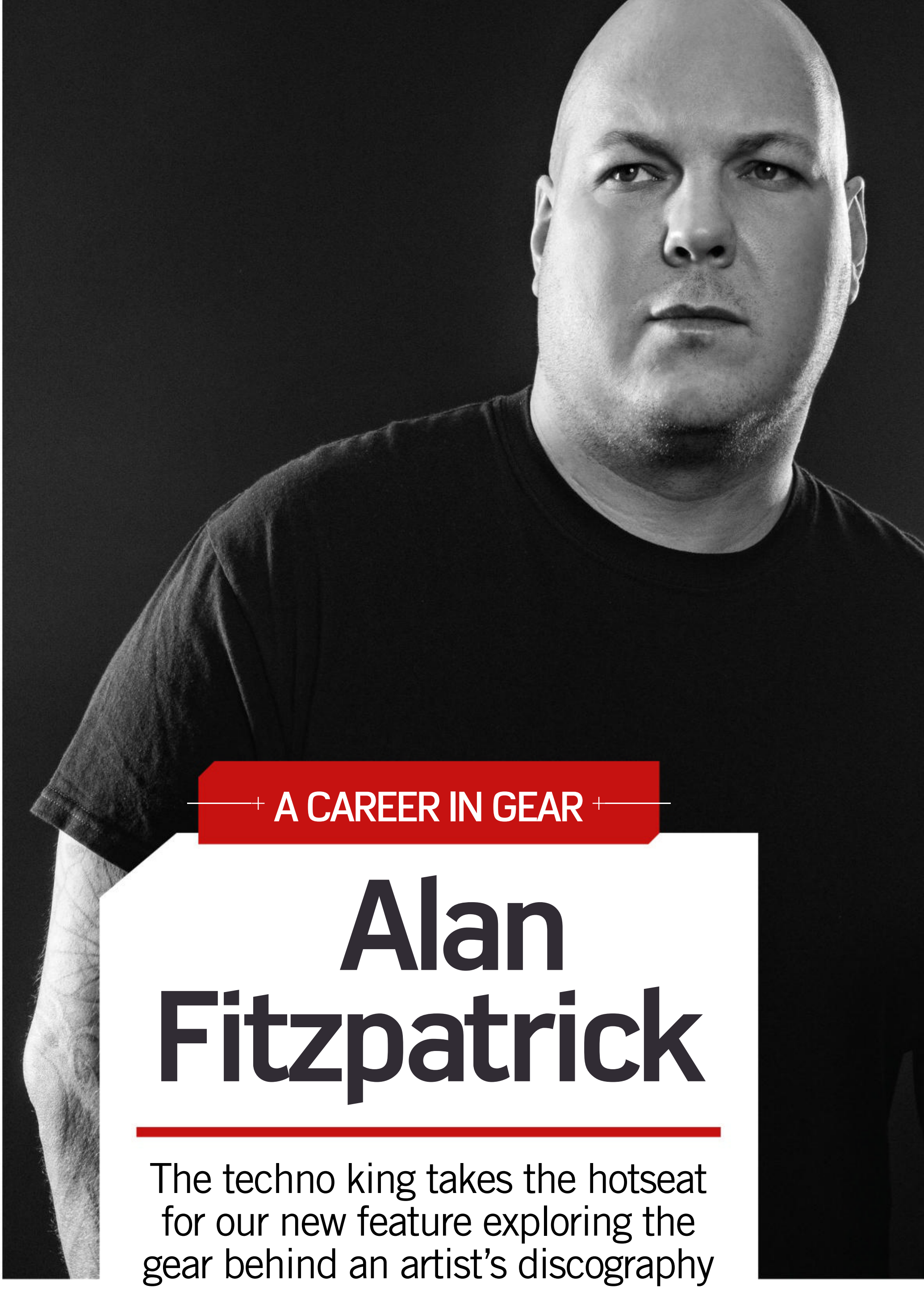
Cool sequencing effects per step, like roll, glide, tempo, micro-move, chance, roll, and random

It's a very effective sampler as well as a powerful sequencer

–

Uses the USB-C port for power; to connect other USB devices, you'll need a hub

No MIDI files! If you want to work with MIDI, record MIDI out, or work with mod files



A CAREER IN GEAR

Alan Fitzpatrick

The techno king takes the hotseat for our new feature exploring the gear behind an artist's discography

Over the past decade, Alan Fitzpatrick has achieved the admirable feat of straddling the underground and the mainstream, headlining Berghain while dropping hits on BBC Radio 1. Best known for releasing caustic techno on venerable imprints like Drumcode, Hotflush and Hypercolour, he's shown a softer side in recent years, embracing disco edits and experimental electronica.

This November, Alan is sharing his first album in a decade. *Machine Therapy*, released on Anjunadeep, is something of a love letter to his studio. "The time I had in the studio was like a therapy session," he says. "Particularly with the pandemic, not knowing what the future might look like, being able to get into the studio with no time constraints and really pour my heart into making music, helped me get through the last year, and keep my mental health in check."

For our new *Career in Gear* feature, Alan's taken us on a guided tour of his discography, picking five releases that stand out and giving us an insight into five pieces of studio equipment that inspired them.

Reason

HEAR IT ON...

Skeksis / For an Endless Night EP (Drumcode)

"My first proper release on Drumcode. All done in Reason, no hardware. I mainly used the Malström synth and Thor. This is probably one my favourite releases to date; I'm sure Drumcode fans would agree that it still goes off today. As a release, I think it demonstrates how powerful Reason can be for making techno; producers don't need a studio full of gear to make a big hit.

"In terms of studio tools or equipment I couldn't live without, Reason has to have a mention. I've used it since it was launched. I know the software inside out and I can't fault it. I honestly can't see me ever changing to anything else. I've watched it change and progress over the years and morph into the product it is today. As an artist I'd say it's the only DAW I'm fully compatible with. One hundred percent – my discography wouldn't be the same without it."

Thor

HEAR IT ON...

Ultimate Distortion (We Are The Brave)

"This is a collaboration I did with Rebuke. Reuben sent me the base idea and said it needed something to give it that 'it factor'. It was about 60% there but just needed something else to finish the track off. I loaded it into Reason and layered in a phat, sawtooth Reese-style bassline using a synth called Thor. It's an incredible synth, one of my favourites to flesh out a track and give it that extra flair. The huge bass drops on that track are nuts, the crowds love it. All wouldn't be possible without the synth – thanks Thor!"

Moog Sub37

HEAR IT ON...

Angstrom (We Are The Brave)

"This is one of many collaborations I did with my mate Reset Robot. We've worked on a heap of different projects together over the years so it's always a pleasure to be in the studio jamming with him. He's another Reason lover! Although we did use Reason, it was only to sequence the track. The whole release is mainly hardware-based. The beats are from Elektron's Machinedrum and most of the synth sounds are from the Moog Sub37 and the Moog Grandmother synth. I'm addicted to synths, they're so versatile. Collecting them is definitely an expensive hobby."

Roland Juno-60

HEAR IT ON...

Sundancing (Hot Creations)

"This track is from the Hot Creations collab with Jamie Jones. We were channelling the Ibiza summer mood; picture DC10 terrace sunrise vibes. Gear-wise, this track has Roland to thank. I used my Roland Juno-60 for the main chord patterns. The Juno-60 has got to be my favourite vintage synth, I searched high and low for a pristine condition one and finally found one from a guy who had it since new. Sat in his loft, his mum bought him it in the early '80s to 'learn piano', and he's kept it ever since. Admitting he never really used it. What a cool thing for your mum to buy you."

> "WHAT A COOL THING FOR YOUR MUM TO BUY YOU"

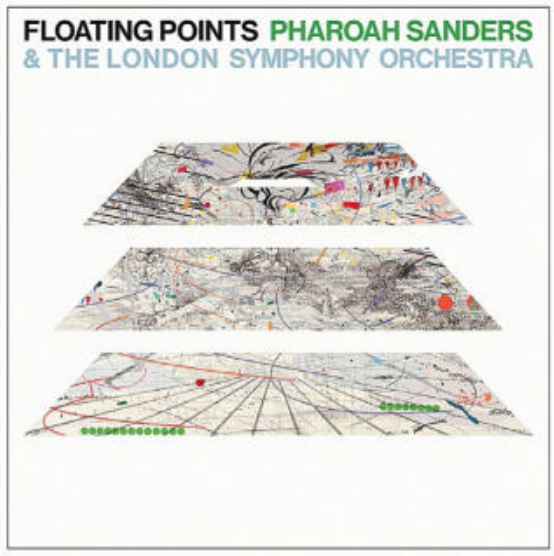
Roland TR-909

HEAR IT ON...

Magnetic Dog (We Are The Brave)

"One of my early releases on my label. I made this using a couple of powerhouse techno-making machines; the Roland TR-909 drum machine and TB-303 Bassline. *Magnetic Dog* uses both of the Roland machines for its main vibe, all sequenced in Reason. It's a full-on club banger that I'm very proud of. Also pretty amazing to have had a 'Trevino' from the late great Marcus Intalex; his mix took it to the next level." FM

ESSENTIAL ALBUMS 2021



Floating Points, Pharoah Sanders, LSO

Promises Luaka Bop

One of the most subtle and expressive producers currently operating pairs with a true jazz icon, resulting in an album that lives up to its promise.

Leon Vynehall

Rare, Forever Ninja Tune

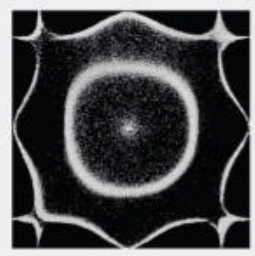
On the ambitious UK-born producer's latest album, detailed electronic sound design and subtle conceptual touches sit side-by-side with gorgeous melodies and infectious drum patterns.

aya, *im hole* Hyperdub

The debut album from London producer aya blends raw, bass-heavy club tracks with genuinely disquieting experimental moments. Hugely distinctive and unique.

Jon Hopkins, *Music For Psychedelic Therapy* Domino

The much lauded producer ditches the beats for a hallucinogenic-inspired ambient LP that captures some of the best work of his career.



Madlib, *Sound Ancestors* Madlib Invazion

The master of hip-hop instrumentals gets a much-deserved time to shine, with a little mixing and arrangement help from Four Tet.

Daniel Avery, *Together In Static* Phantasy

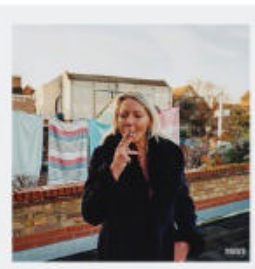
Created out of his debut live show, the London producer's latest breaks up his signature techno rhythms with lush pads and emotive melodies.

Low, *Hey What* Sub Pop

Remarkably, 13 albums into their career, the alt-rock duo are making some of the most ambitious cross-over music out there, blending moody rock and brooding ambient electronics.

Eris Drew, *Quivering In Time* T4T LUV NRG

Recorded in her remote cabin-in-the-woods studio, Eris Drew's debut LP is the raw, rowdy and up-beat house record we all need in 2021.



Joy Orbison, *Still Slipping Vol 1.* XL Recordings

The stalwart of UK dance music finally dropped his debut LP, combining high-quality house and garage beats with intimate tributes to his family.

Space Afrika, *Honest Labour* Dais

The second album from the Manchester duo combines short ambient sketches, dub-like washes of sound and carefully curated vocal features into an absorbing melodic journey.

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MOST WANTED FOR 2022...

Korg DrumLogue

Korg teased a beat-centric addition to the much-loved 'Logue line back at last January's virtual NAMM event. We've heard little in the way of updates since then. Still, we've high hopes for this one when it eventually arrives.

Apple Logic Pro 11

OK, so we know 10.7 only arrived recently, and 10.5 brought some pretty significant updates in 2020, but Pro X has been with us almost 9 years now – surely version 11 must be due soon?

Erica Synths Perkons HD-01

Combining versatile digital sounds with meaty analogue filters and a crafty-looking sequencer, this was a real standout at Superbooth 2021.

PWM Malevolent

This debut instrument from new UK brand PWM looks like a brilliantly approachable introduction to semi-modular synthesis – and it sounded great when we got our first demo.

Steinberg Cubase 12

A new licensing system might not sound that exciting to some, but we can't wait to be able to easily jump onto Cubase on multiple studio machines with a simple login!

Rhodes Mk8

With a price point around the £10k mark, the newly-revived Rhodes isn't going to be for everyone, but its creators seem to be aiming to create the most impressive EP possible.

Oberheim... Something?

Back in the summer Behringer returned the Oberheim brand to its namesake originator, meaning Tom is free to create 'Oberheim' synths again. Our fingers are crossed for something new.

Roland Boutique JX-8P and JD-800

It's been a while since we had a new Boutique to play with, but the start of 2022 is bringing recreations of analogue and digital classics.

IK UNO Synth Poly

We're speculating here, but given the success of IK's two analogue debuts – including this year's impressive Synth Pro – here's hoping the Italians have a wallet-friendly poly in the works?

Whatever Behringer end up releasing...

Who knows what we'll get from Behringer in 2022. The promised Edge drum synth? A CS-80 remake? Knock off Nintendo 64? All bets are off.

soothe2

soothe harshness, save time

SPIFF

transient control, oek-style

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